

Charlie Baker

Do the ends justify the means? An examination of ethical theory in the anime

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion and Death Note

Research question: How do the shows *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* (2006) and *Death Note* (2006) display contrasting ethical views in regards to deontology and utilitarianism?

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Preface

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion (2006) and *Death Note* (2006) are Japanese animated shows containing ethical debates as to whether the ends justify the means. This essay explores contrasting themes and ethics alongside the significance of portraying morality in text and the benefits of doing so in an enjoyable, fantastical manner.

Ethical literary criticism, deontology, utilitarianism, and anime defined

Immanuel Kant's theory of deontology is an ethical theory that forms the analysis of *Death Note* (2006) and *Code Geass* (2006). Deontology states that specific acts must be considered morally rather than by overall consequences. Kant's ethics are "organized around the notion of a 'categorical imperative'" (Haden). The categorical imperative states that "one should always respect the humanity in others," and "one should only act in accordance with rules that could hold for everyone." (Haden) These mean to treat everyone equally, with respect, and apply the same moral rules to everyone, including yourself. An example of a categorical imperative would be to not steal, stealing disrespects the humanity of others and if everyone stole from each other, society would not function. According to deontology, there are no exceptions because the act of stealing is immoral.

Utilitarianism is the opposite of deontology. Where deontology states that each act must be moral without consideration of the results, utilitarianism focuses on "what produces the best consequences" (Nathanson) without consideration of the acts that led to said consequences. Utilitarianism is a hedonistic ethical theory, meaning "the only thing that is good in itself is pleasure" (Nathanson) therefore whatever maximizes pleasure while minimizing pain is the correct action. From a utilitarian perspective, stealing money from a homeless person is wrong

because the pleasure gained from the action would be less than their displeasure, but stealing food to feed your family would be morally right because the pleasure gained is greater than the displeasure of the person you are stealing from. The act of stealing is the same, but the consequences are different.

Ethical literary criticism “interpret[s] and analyz[es] literature from an ethical perspective.” (Zhenzhao 190) In ethical literary theory, works are analyzed as pieces to express moral principles because they are “a product of morality” (Zhenzhao 190). *Code Geass* and *Death Note* raise ethical debates about deontology and utilitarianism, which benefit from analysis through a lens of ethical literary criticism. These shows, targeted to adolescent audiences, provide moral principles and lessons which, “enable people to understand society and life from an ethical perspective” and “provide moral experience for reference in their pursuit of self-perfection.” (Zhenzhao 191) Reader response criticism is a supplementary lens used in this analysis, which “engages... with... problems of how readers understand texts and how we can elicit and interpret individual responses.” (Hunt 81) *Code Geass* and *Death Note* establish ethical lessons through how the audience responds to the text, based on preconceived beliefs such as “killing is immoral”, allowing them to form their opinions.

Anime is a term for animation originating from Japan. It is a popular medium consumed by people across the world. Anime is sometimes “considered as animation for children.” (Pace 59) Despite this, many anime are “full of ethical dilemmas” that can provide a “critical ethical analysis” (Pace 59). *Code Geass* and *Death Note* are compelling examples of anime that despite being targeted at younger audiences contain ethical dilemmas worth deeper analysis.

Introduction

The anime *Code Geass* (2006) and *Death Note* (2006) are similar in nature and presentation. Both start with a high school student who finds a mysterious power that allows them to change the world to suit their vision of a better future. The shows follow these characters as they hide their identities and use their powers and intelligence in morally questionable ways to influence the events around them. The shows later diverge in plot, but the way they portray contrasting views on deontology and utilitarianism remain present.

Code Geass is an anime consisting of 50 episodes, created by Ichirō Ōkouchi and Gorō Taniguchi. It follows the story of Lelouch Lamperouge, an exiled prince of the show's stand in for Britain, Britannia. In the first episode Lelouch obtains a power called Geass, giving him the ability to control anyone he wishes simply by making eye contact with them. Using this power, Lelouch takes on the alias of Zero, becoming a masked vigilante. He begins a crusade against the oppressive country of Britannia, which concludes with his death and the end of Britannia's regime. *Code Geass* aligns itself with utilitarianism. The characters in the show actively discuss and debate about the ideas of utilitarianism and deontology. The characters' acts have ramifications that lead the audience to consider the morality of said actions. The dystopian alternate reality of the show enhances the morality of utilitarian acts. Finally, religious imagery and symbolism are utilized, portraying the ethics of the show in a subtle yet effective manner.

Death Note was written by Tsugumi Ohba and adapted into an anime with 37 episodes. *Death Note* follows the story of Light Yagami, a high school student who is given a magical object called a "Death Note" by a god of death named Ryuk. This grants him the ability to kill anyone if he knows their name and face. Using the Death Note, Light kills criminals in an attempt to make the world a better place. *Death Note* aligns itself with deontology and against

utilitarian views. *Death Note* makes a bold choice by having the audience root against the protagonist Light, due to his egotistical nature and the immoral actions he commits such as killing innocents and lying to achieve what he believes will be a better world. Many of the characters that the audience roots for oppose Light's ideals. Similar to *Code Geass*, *Death Note* uses setting, religious imagery, and symbolism to establish themes around ethical philosophy, however in this case to critique rather than uphold utilitarianism.

The depiction of ethics through setting

The alternate reality of *Code Geass* (2006) enhances the ethical debates of actions performed by characters. In *Code Geass*, Britannia "looms as the world's only superpower" (*Code Geass*, "The Day a New Demon Was Born"). The first half of the show takes place in Japan, renamed Area 11, which has been conquered by the oppressive Britannian Empire, and it "became a dominion of the Empire" and "was stripped of its freedom, its rights, and its name" ("The Day a New Demon Was Born"). Because the show's setting mirrors the real world in terms of historical actions, such as Britain conquering other countries, and the clear injustice that occurs, the audience is made to feel like action must be taken. When characters perform immoral actions, they feel justified because it seems necessary to the audience in the context of a world similar but worse than ours. Anyone following deontological principles, primarily focusing on the correct actions, is not taking the necessary steps for progress.

Death Note's (2006) setting differs from *Code Geass*. Besides the Death Note, there are no differences from the real world. Despite this, Light claims that the world is "rotten" (*Death Note*, "Rebirth") because of criminals who steal and murder. Given that the setting is based in reality, the audience presumably disagrees with the idea that criminals need to be murdered to

“fix” the world despite the fact that “wars have diminished and crime rates dropped by 70%” (*Death Note*, “New World”) after Light’s use of the Death Note. The benefit of using a realistic setting to critique utilitarianism is that Light’s actions seem rooted in reality and the audience can more easily reflect on the outcomes of his actions. While *Code Geass* uses its dystopian setting to enhance the morality of utilitarian actions, *Death Note* uses its realistic setting to do the opposite.

The portrayal of utilitarian characters

One way messages regarding ethics are conveyed is through the use of the protagonists of each show, Lelouch Lamperouge in *Code Geass* (2006) and Light Yagami in *Death Note* (2006). They are characterized as utilitarian but are portrayed in drastically different ways. This is demonstrated via the characters’ reactions to the acts they commit and their outcomes, what they are willing to do to achieve their goals, and their self awareness of their actions.

Lelouch Lamperouge is described as “a demon” (*Code Geass*, “The Day a New Demon was Born”) throughout *Code Geass*. Notably, the first episode is named “The Day a New Demon was Born” in reference to Lelouch gaining the power of Geass. Despite this, he has remorse for his actions, resulting in the audience supporting him despite his immoral acts. When Lelouch’s actions result in the death of his friend's father, he is confronted with the consequences of his decisions, resulting in the character considering whether what he is doing is morally correct. When questioned about it, he responds in a distressed manner stating the questioner should “shut up” (*Code Geass*, “Shirley at Gunpoint”), a less composed response than what is normal for Lelouch. This demonstrates how he considers the consequences of his actions and how he feels remorse for what he has done, but he continues on because he wants to “change everything” and

make the world a “gentler place” (*Code Geass*, “Shirley at Gunpoint”). Lelouch’s conflict between remorse and the resolve to continue establishes the benefits of utilitarianism, by depicting a protagonist who has empathy and believes what they are doing is for the best. Lelouch cares about the people he is harming, but continues his mission because he believes more suffering will be alleviated if he does. Furthermore, Lelouch is willing to make his own life worse for the betterment of society. In the final episode, titled “Re;” Lelouch sacrifices himself to “break the cycle of hatred” that held the world for so long. If Lelouch solely sacrificed others in service of his goal he would not be sympathetic in the eyes of the audience, but due to his sacrifice, his commitment to his goal is solidified. Utilitarians are characterized, not as people willing to sacrifice others for the greater good, but as people trying to achieve the best results for everyone, even if it goes against their personal interests. Lelouch’s ability to lead others makes him a compelling utilitarian. Lelouch draws many to follow him due to his philosophy to lead by example, highlighted when he says, “If the king doesn’t lead, how can he expect his subordinates to follow?” (*Code Geass*, “The Day a New Demon was Born”) Because he is often the first to try to change things and only commands others to act how he himself would act, it reinforces the idea that he truly believes in what he is trying to accomplish. His resolve is demonstrated to the audience and it gives the impression that despite his immoral acts the ends will have justified the means.

In *Death Note*, Light Yagami states that his goal is to “clean up the world” (*Death Note*, “Rebirth”). Despite his success, Light, and by extension his utilitarian ideals, are criticized, and in doing so *Death Note* aligns itself against utilitarianism. Light is characterized as being egotistical, believing that any who oppose him are immoral and beneath him. When a detective on TV claims that Light is evil for killing people his reaction is to get angry, proclaiming, “You

think... I'm evil? I am justice!" ("Confrontation"). Light also routinely compares himself to a "god" ("Rebirth"). Through his egomaniacal tendencies and lack of questioning of his actions, the audience doubts whether Light is correct and has really considered the morality of what he is doing. Not only does Light treat those who oppose him without remorse, he also treats those who are on his side in a similar way. When one of his associates gets kidnapped, she pleads, "You have to help me" ("Malice"). Instead of risking himself to help a person loyal to him, Light decides to kill her, writing her name in the Death Note, causing her to "burn herself to death" ("Malice") because she may reveal Light's identity. Because he has such little regard for the ones who are on his side, the audience who believes in what Light is doing feel betrayed and the ones who do not believe in his methods, are further alienated because of his ruthless actions. Unlike Lelouch in *Code Geass*, Light lacks selflessness in his actions. Although Light is willing to sacrifice others, he is unwilling to sacrifice anything of his own. When Light first claims the Death Note and begins killing, he is offered a deal by Ryuk that would make his goal of "cleaning up the world" ("Rebirth") much easier. Ryuk offers Light the ability to gain "Shinigami's eye" ("Dealings"), which would allow him to kill anyone just by seeing their face, in exchange for halving Light's lifespan. Light refuses this deal, demonstrating that he holds himself to different moral principles than he holds others to. Since he is unwilling to make his own life worse, it clarifies that he is trying to make the world a better place for his own self gratification rather than for the inherent positive effect of his actions.

The portrayal of deontological characters

The primary deontological character in *Code Geass* (2006) is Lelouch's foil, Suzaku Kururugi. He is characterized as being self-righteous and hypocritical. Because Suzaku is an antagonist with questionable principles it demonstrates flaws in deontological ideals. There are numerous occasions where he states ideals that are in direct contrast to Lelouch's such as, "any ends gained through contemptible means aren't worth anything" (*Code Geass*, "His Name is Zero"). Near the end of the series Suzaku snaps, claiming that before he had been, "stubbornly maintaining that the means are more important than the end result. I was idealistic and self-righteous" (*Code Geass*, "Emperor Dismissed"). When he finally abandons those principles, it serves as an impactful critique of deontology. Having a strong protagonist while also having an antagonist who gets in the way of the greater good only to realize they are wrong amplifies the audience's allegiance against deontology.

Death Note (2006) is filled with morally ambiguous characters, and very few of them act purely for the sake of justice. Soichiro Yagami, Light's father, is one of the few characters who puts justice above self interest. He acts based on deontological principles, performing actions because the acts themselves are good rather than because they will lead to better results. When he gains possession of the Death Note, he refuses to use it, even on his deathbed. People around him beg him to "use [his] last bit of energy to write down [the] name" of the person who led to his death (*Death Note*, "Father") but Soichiro is unwilling to take revenge. Soichiro is characterized as a kind, hardworking person who maintains his ideals, showing that doing things purely because they are the right things to do is difficult, but are worth doing anyway. This leads the audience to respect him, supporting the deontological principle of performing actions solely because they are right. Characters and their actions are clear for audiences to empathize with,

allowing for communication of ethical debates that can be understood by any viewer. Through compelling characters, *Code Geass* and *Death Note* ensure that anyone can view, learn, and retain knowledge from its moral principles.

The depiction of ethics through religious imagery

In *Code Geass* (2006) Lelouch is often characterized as a messiah. He refers to his persona of Zero as a saviour for the Japanese people to inspire others. When he sacrifices himself at the end of the show his arms are splayed out in a Christ-like manner.

Figure 1: Lelouch after sacrificing himself



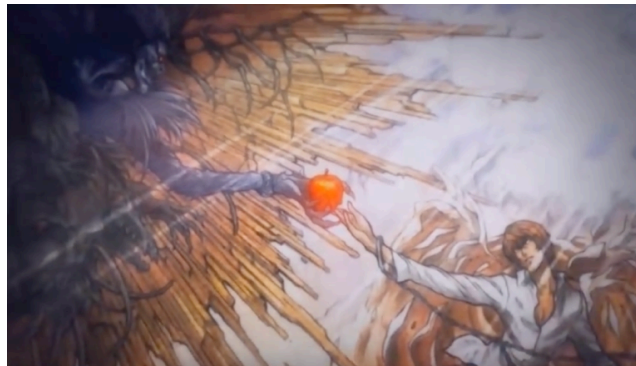
(*Code Geass*, “Re;”)

Lelouch’s face is obscured at a low angle, emphasizing that he has become a symbol rather than a person. The audience's attention is drawn to the hyperbolic aspects of the scene such as the blood tainting the extravagant white clothing, the trail of blood leading to his head, and the dramatic posture of his body, as if he is ascending. Their attention is not on Lelouch as a person. Much like how religious figures are symbolized through objects such as crosses, Lelouch is depicted as more of a symbol than a person. The irony is that Lelouch does not become a symbol of worship, but of hatred, having “all sorts of hateful and evil deeds... blamed on [him]”

allowing the world to “move forward into the future” (“Re;”) by directing people’s hatred towards him rather than towards each other. By depicting sacrifice, *Code Geass* demonstrates a powerful aspect of utilitarianism where it is moral to sacrifice oneself, making it necessary to even become hated by all if it means achieving a greater good.

The opposite of Lelouch’s sacrifice is Light’s ego, demonstrated in a shot in the opening sequence of *Death Note* (2006).

Figure 2: Allusion to Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*



(*Death Note*, Episodes 1-19, Opening)

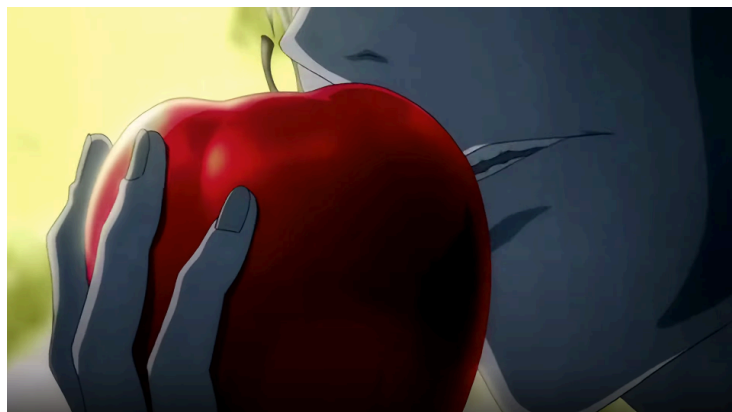
The shot alludes to Michelangelo’s Biblical painting, *The Creation of Adam*, where God gives Adam life. Instead, Light is depicted as receiving an apple from Ryuk, a forbidden fruit, which has connotations of temptation to indulge in things that are not moral. Light sees himself as a religious figure, further demonstrated when he claims that he is a “god” (“Rebirth”) portraying the idea that utilitarianism is inherently egotistical because one believes that they know best, giving them the ability to do immoral actions because it is for the “greater good”. Furthermore as Light accepts the apple, symbolizing the *Death Note*, he becomes corrupted similar to how Adam and Eve become corrupted after eating the forbidden fruit. Through the corruption and power of the Death Note working with his utilitarian ideals and ego, Light embodies a corrupt utilitarian, committing and justifying immoral actions as being for the greater good, despite that are

primarily to satiate his ego. While Lelouch depicts himself as a god so others have faith in his actions, Light views himself as a god regardless of what others think and justifies his acts because of it. Religion is a useful tool because it is recognizable across the world, even to a Japanese audience; adolescents may not have an understanding of philosophical debates, but they may have some understanding of religious imagery and therefore the ethical debates within Christianity. The religious imagery can serve as a bridge between foreign concepts of philosophy and the audience's prior knowledge.

The depiction of ethics through symbolism

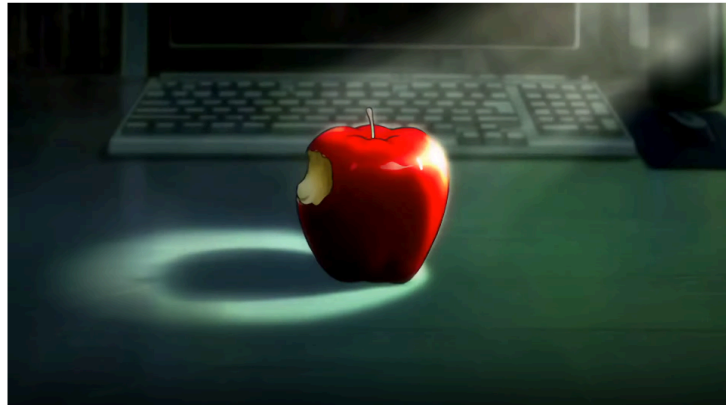
Symbolism is used as a primary method to communicate the undertones of *Death Note* (2006). The opening of *Death Note* contains a scene where Light bites into an apple (Figure 3), then a shot where the same apple with a bite on it transitions into a shot of the Death Note (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 3: Light biting an apple



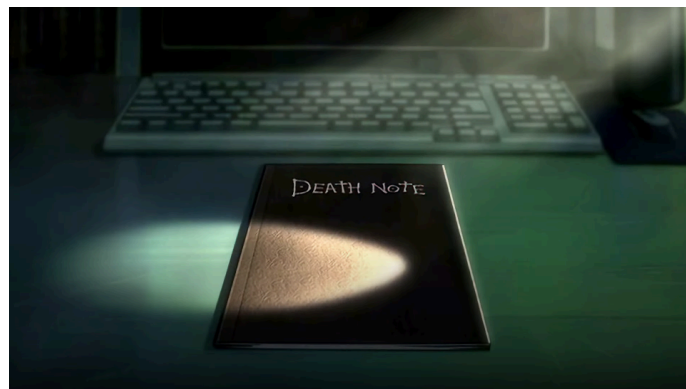
(*Death Note*, Episodes 1-19, Opening)

Figure 4: Apple on desk



(Episodes 1-19, Opening)

Figure 5: Apple transitioning into the Death Note



(Episodes 1-19, Opening)

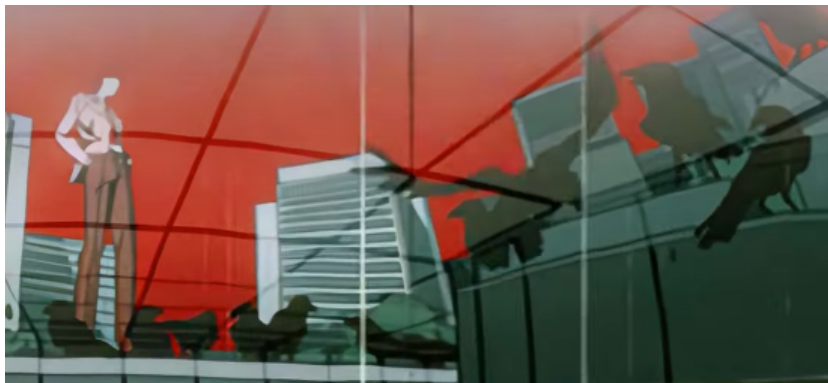
These shots demonstrate the apple as a symbol for the Death Note, which as discussed previously has the religious connotation of being immoral. Symbolizing the Death Note as a “forbidden fruit” critiques utilitarianism because it states an object that can manipulate others for what the user believes to be the “greater good” is tempting but morally wrong. Another piece of symbolism is in the closing credits when Light is surrounded by doves, which transition into crows.

Figure 6: Light surrounded by crows



(Episodes 1-19, Closing Credits)

Figure 7: Light surrounded by crows



(Episodes 1-19, Closing Credits)

The dichotomy between Light being shown around doves and crows is significant because doves are symbols of peace, freedom, or love, while crows are symbols of death, trickery, and tragedy. This illustrates how Light's actions may have altruistic intent but the acts themselves are immoral, also tying into the religious connotations of corruption discussed previously.

Code Geass (2006) uses two symbols of utilitarianism, the portrayal of chess, and the power of Geass. The symbol of chess is shown using three methods, the opening of the show, the naming conventions of the episodes, and Lelouch's references to the game. The opening ends with a shot of a chess piece.

Figure 8: Chess piece in opening



(*Code Geass*, Episodes 1-12, Opening)

The episodes in the show are referred to as "turns" almost as if they are a part of a large chess game, and Lelouch often treats events like a game of chess, such as his philosophy that, "if the king doesn't lead, how can he expect his subordinates to follow?" ("The Day a New Demon was Born") In chess, pieces must be sacrificed to win the game. Because the plot of *Code Geass* is treated like a chess game, the audience is told that for Lelouch to succeed, for the game to be won, sacrifices need to be made for the greater good. The power of Geass, Lelouch's ability to control others is another symbol, depicted through a consistent shape in Lelouch's left eye each time he uses the power.

Figure 9: Geass in Lelouch's eye



(“The Day A New Demon Was Born”)

Geass gives one the power to control others, an act that, in isolation, is immoral. Despite this, the symbol appears to have wings suggesting that it gives freedom. Furthermore, it is described by Lelouch as, “a wish” that is “a request to someone to give you the power to achieve what you can’t on your own” (*Code Geass*, “Re;”). Later, Lelouch loses control of Geass, being unable to turn it off, displayed when it is present in both of his eyes.

Figure 10: Geass in both eyes



(“The Ragnarök Connection”)

It portrays the manipulative nature of utilitarianism and the fact that utilitarians have to use others to achieve the “greatest good” in a positive way. They are using others to achieve something greater than what they could achieve by themselves. Geass also depicts utilitarianism to be freeing but constricting simultaneously, having the ability to do anything if it results in the

greater good, but also having the moral responsibility to. The symbols in *Code Geass* and *Death Note* take abstract ideas such as notebooks that can kill people and turn them into simpler symbols that the audience can more easily understand such as apples or chess, communicating the critique of utilitarianism in a more accessible manner.

The effect of ethical philosophy in *Code Geass* and *Death Note*

Ethical philosophy in *Code Geass* (2006) and *Death Note* (2006) is important because it can teach the audience how to consider the ethics of their actions, making them better people. In his thesis, David Moltow argues, “that literature can furnish a valuable supplement to ethical thought... [and] can contribute autonomously to our individual understanding of the ethical life” (Moltow 2). Ethical dilemmas in *Code Geass* and *Death Note* provide audiences with an ideal way to reflect upon moral debates to a greater extent than real life, because, “writers of imaginative literature are not bound by the same formal constraints that confine traditional philosophical discourse” (Moltow 47). Both works contain fantastical elements which are out of the realm of human capabilities that pose exaggerated ethical questions inciting the audience to think critically about philosophy. Works such as *Code Geass* and *Death Note* “make the abstract concrete, bring it home to the heart, and force us to think with innovative imagination” (Moltow 188). *Code Geass* and *Death Note* are targeted towards an adolescent audience and their fantastical nature causes them to wonder, “what would I do?” This question expands thinking on the consequences of actions and “practice in abstract thinking helps prepare for making complex, concrete decisions in adolescence and adulthood” (“Moral Development | HHS Office of Population Affairs”). By developing ethical thinking we become more moral and “by being moral, we enrich our lives and the lives of those around us” (McCartney and Parent). While an

average viewer of *Code Geass* and *Death Note* may not be able to define the terms consequentialism and deontology, they will have a better understanding of those concepts and could apply them in the future, having learned this in an enjoyable manner.

Conclusion

Code Geass (2006), aligning itself with utilitarianism and against deontology and *Death Note* (2006) doing the opposite, depict these ethical philosophies as central principles of their stories. They achieve this through the use of utilitarian and deontological characters, how they are characterized and the audience's perception of them; setting, changing the audience's perception of characters' actions based on personal experience; religious imagery; and symbolism, both taking abstract concepts and making them more accessible. The representation of ethical dilemmas in these shows is important because of the value in encouraging adolescents to further think about ethics and moral principles. Because they are entertaining and contain fantastical elements *Code Geass* and *Death Note* are dismissed as non-literary and not valuable. The analysis above demonstrates that this is not the case, rather they contain valuable information about ethics, blurring the line between entertainment and education. Often, things that are entertaining are considered less valuable, being consumed only as a break from the real world. This should not be the case, rather than taking breaks with mindless entertainment, the focus should be on taking valuable lessons such as ethics and making them as entertaining as possible. *Code Geass* and *Death Note* accomplish this by asking the question of whether the ends justify the means which causes the audience to learn about ethics in an engaging way.

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