

Ikiru: Generativity Versus Stagnation

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Abstract

This paper deals with the concept of “Generativity” as coined by Erikson (1959), as illustrated in the film *Ikiru* (Motoki & Kurosawa, 1952).

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Akira Kurasawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* (a title that translates roughly as "To Live"), tells the story of Kanji Watanabe, a middle-aged civil servant living in post-reconstruction Japan. After 30 years of work in a dysfunctional bureaucracy, Watanabe has lost all sense of purpose in his position and spends his days approving or denying paperwork that collects in giant stacks. While working, he absentmindedly uses a plan he once wrote to improve office efficiency as an ink blotter- At one time he had approached this job with an idealism now long forgotten. When a group of upset parents petition Watanabe's office to do something about a dangerous cesspit in their neighborhood, they are sent on a never-ending fiasco of departmental visits. Watanabe and his subordinates are complicit in this, dutifully observing the rules of a broken system rather than making waves to find a solution. Watanabe's home life is similarly rote and detached. Living with his adult son and daughter-in-law, Watanabe has long since been relegated to being a burden. The young couple go so far as to speculate impatiently about their inheritance within Watanabe's earshot. A widower, we see in a series of vignettes Watanabe's slow estrangement from his son after his wife's funeral. After a bout of pain, Watanabe learns that he has terminal stomach cancer, and in a sort of existential panic tries to find some meaning in his remaining life. Through a series of clumsy attempts, we see Watanabe try to reconnect with his son, to spend the money he had dutifully saved in a series of nightclubs, and finally gravitate towards the one employee of his office who seemed to have any remaining vigor. The employee, a young woman who has resigned from Watanabe's office to find work in a toy factory, fears the older man's attentions might be a romantic advance. Instead Watanabe reveals his predicament, and begs her

to share the secret of her vitality. Her answer slowly marks a turning point for Watanabe- her joy comes from “making something”. By helping make toys, she reveals, she feels as if she’s playing with all the children who touch them. Galvanized, Watanabe resolves to bring meaning to the work he already does, embarking on a project to turn the dangerous lot of stagnant water in the town into a playground for children. We see the effect that Watanabe’s actions have after his death, the people that his dedication affected, and we return to him at his work’s completion, satisfied that his life had some meaning.

In Erik Erikson’s foundational work *Identity and the Life Cycle*, the author proposes a series of eight dialectics that define distinct phases of life. In each stage an individual must align interior drives with social expectations in order to progress. After passing through these phases an individual finally assesses their own life and either experiences satisfaction or despair at wasted opportunity- a life well lived and death accepted or deep remorse and frustration. At the time of its writing, Erikson’s framework was a departure from his peers and the author’s own Freudian background. The prevailing attitude at the time held that an individual’s personality became well-defined and basically immutable in their 30’s. Erikson posited, however, that by striving through continued crises that come from changes in biological, psychological, and social processes, the self is further defined and a personality continues to grow throughout life.

In establishing his stages of adulthood, Erikson (1980), describes the conflict of “Generativity versus Stagnation”:

Generativity is primarily the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation [...] this is a stage of the growth of the healthy personality and that where such enrichment fails, together, regression from generativity to an obsessive need for pseudo intimacy takes place, often with a pervading sense of stagnation and

interpersonal impoverishment. Individuals who do not develop generativity often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own one and only child. The mere fact of having or even wanting children does not itself attest to generativity[...]

While this concept might be rooted in a biological imperative for reproduction, it is not necessarily satisfied by procreating, and in fact hinges on a personal appraisal that might be met instead by some act that places one in the larger context of history and benefits future generations. This appraisal, once satisfied, allows an acceptance of death to follow. Since Erikson's publishing of his "Epigenetic Diagram" that outlined these stages of life, parallels have been found in the work of other psychologists, and research has been done to test and elaborate on Erikson's premises. In his introduction to a survey of relevant research, Slater (2003) compares Erikson's proposed generative stage to Viktor Frankl's famous autobiography and theoretical work *Man's Search for Meaning*. A holocaust survivor, Frankl described methods of reframing events and searching for meaning as a way to stay emotionally whole through otherwise unbearably traumatic and hopeless situations (Frankl 1963). Slater also makes comparisons to Maslow's theory of self-actualization as a final hierarchical need of individuals. In Maslow's theory, self actualization is equally possible through creative expression as it is through effective parenting. In either endeavor there is a personal appraisal that happens within a larger frame of society and history (Maslow, 1970).

Modern research has held up Erikson's theories as relevant and added detail to them, especially in the area of his stages of adult development. Of note here are Levinson (1986), who studied adult males and observed a period of social and career status-seeking that deferred concerns about future generations, and Vaillant and Milofsky (1980), who studied adult maturation

in 486 males, looking at all aspects of their life and their relationship to parenting. Numerous studies of women and their stages of adult development showed differences from men's development through the generative phase of life not addressed by Erikson, possibly related to societal pressures centering around gender roles and parenting (Edelstein, 1997). Vaillant and Milofsky's study included men who had children but had failed to fulfill the role of parent, and used the term "self-absorption" in referring to them, a withdrawn state, "in which they seem unable to engage with their children in authentic ways" (Slater, 2003, p. 62). Sneed, Whitbourne, and Culang (2006) used data from a 34 year study that began in the 1960s and conducted their own follow-up study of the men and women in the original sample, as well as new college-age subjects to contrast with the originals. They demonstrated through their research that distinct developmental trajectories existed for each stage of adult development, predicted by Erikson's theory.

In *Ikiru* our protagonist has seemingly followed every societal dictate prescribed by the culture of his time and place. He has married, fathered a child, adhered to a strict work ethic, saved money, and advanced in status. However each of these achievements, while passing the criteria of society, have not woken Watanabe from the emotional stupor that met him after the death of his wife. Crises in Watanabe's adult life such as loss of intimacy and failure in responsibility as a parent have prevented him from progressing through the final stages of adult development and left him in a state of stagnation. In his estrangement from his son we see how the possible fulfillment of parenthood has been deferred for Watanabe. In his work we see how the ritual of busywork has replaced prioritizing work that holds meaning. Feeling out of time, Watanabe finds himself despairing at a life wasted. While Maslow believed the self-actualization we might associate with parenthood is possible through a feeling of mastery over a skill,

Watanabe is too short on time to learn another skill beyond office work, which brings him no satisfaction. After a flash of insight and newfound determination, he dedicates himself to do meaningful work in this realm. Maslow himself praised the film, saying that a self-obsessed pursuit of actualization is wrong-thinking, that “The only path was the Ikiru path [...] salvation via hard work and total commitment to doing well the job that fate or personal destiny calls you to do, or any important job that ‘calls for’ doing.” (Maslow, 2000, p 12). Watanabe’s discovery of his “call” comes after a series of “awakenings” in which he revisits stages of adulthood in which he failed to progress. His first reaction to the crisis of approaching death is to indulge in all of the self-serving pleasures that he felt that he had originally denied himself, creating a sort of second adolescence. When he finds no pleasure or vigor-of-life in this, he is filled with an “obsessive need for pseudo intimacy” (Erikson, 1980, p 102). It’s only when he finds a mission within the context of the life he had already lived that he stops his desperate attempts at escape and instead finds fulfillment. Watanabe’s mission goes beyond the self-actualization of Maslow describes, in that his goal is to serve the needs of children, to make a small part of the world better for them, regardless of whether he is individually recognized for the work. Erikson’s concept of generativity is clearly defined as springing from a desire to establish and guide the next generation. A biological impulse redefined by the individual as a call to altruism:

Only he who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments of being, by necessity, the originator of others and the generator of things and ideas— only he may gradually grow the fruit of the seven stages. (Erikson, 1980, p. 102)

While the viewer of *Ikiru* may on the surface simply be happy that Watanabe has found peace after a period of hopelessness, the richness of the experience of the film comes also from

witnessing the quiet dignity of his final generative act, which radiates through time, touching individuals lives long after he is gone.

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