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# Morality in Crisis: Are God's Commandments Relevant in Brecht's Szechwan?

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**Abstract:**

Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* critiques the hegemony of universal moral ideals, particularly the practicality of God's Ten Commandments in a corrupt and self-serving world. The binary opposition between Shen Te and her alter ego Shui Ta symbolises the clash between idealism and pragmatism. It exposes the limitations of absolute morality in complex societal structures. Shen Te's kindness and adherence to moral commandments reflect the rigidity of hegemonic ideologies, yet, her survival necessitates the emergence of Shui Ta, embodying the hybridity required to navigate societal power dynamics. Through the lens of contextualism and cultural relativism, the article explores how truth and morality are shaped by societal pressures and situational realities rather than being universal constructs. Shen Te's "Othering" as a good person within a corrupt society further illustrates the impracticality of rigid moral systems. At the same time, Shui Ta's practicality challenges these norms, enabling her to reclaim power and protect her innocence. Brecht subverts traditional moral ideals by portraying the gods as detached figures whose commandments fail to address real-world challenges, offering an ideological critique of divine expectations. The article argues that morality must be flexible and adaptive, shaped by cultural and structural contexts rather than imposed universally. By aligning the moral crises in the play with modern societal issues, this study invites readers to reconsider the relevance of divine commandments, emphasizing the fluidity of truth and ethics. Brecht's narrative ultimately asserts that survival in an ever-

changing world requires the coexistence of ethical integrity and practical realism, urging a nuanced and situational approach to morality.

**Keywords: Ten Commandments, Universal Morality, Ethical flexibility, Contextualization Truth, Moral Relativism, Duality, Pragmatism vs. Idealism, Hegemony, Cultural Relativism, Power Dynamics, Binary Opposition, Subversion of Morality, Structural Critique, Survival Ethics.**

## Introduction

Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan (Der gute Mensch von Sezuan)*, written in 1938 and first premiered in 1943, is a cornerstone of Brecht's epic theatre. Published by Suhrkamp Verlag in Germany, the play exemplifies epic theatre's purpose: to provoke critical thinking and encourage social change rather than simply entertain. Brecht employed alienation effects (*Verfremdungseffekt*) to emotionally distance the audience from the narrative, enabling them to engage critically with the themes and question societal norms.

Set in a fictionalised Chinese province, the play presents a powerful critique of universal moral ideals, questioning their relevance in a world rife of corruption and self-interest. The gods descend to find a "good person" capable of adhering to divine commandments and discover Shen Te, a kind and selfless woman. However, her adherence to these ideals leads to exploitation, forcing her to adopt the persona of Shui Ta—a pragmatic alter ego—to navigate the harsh realities of society.

The duality of Shen Te and Shui Ta encapsulates the central tension of the play: the clash between idealism and pragmatism. While Shen Te embodies divine moral expectations, Shui Ta represents the compromises necessary for survival. Brecht's narrative challenges the notion of absolute morality. It reveals its inadequacies in addressing the complexities of human existence.

This article argues that morality, as portrayed in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, must adapt to the cultural and structural realities of society. Through the lens of contextualism and cultural relativism, it explores the fluidity of truth and ethics, inviting readers to reconsider the


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applicability of divine commandments in a modern world shaped by socio-political and economic pressures.

**The Binary of Shen Te and Shui Ta: Idealism vs. Pragmatism**

At the heart of *The Good Person of Szechwan* lies the binary opposition between Shen Te and Shui Ta, symbolising the conflict between idealism and pragmatism. Shen Te, the "good person" chosen by the gods, exemplifies compassion, generosity, and selflessness—qualities aligned with divine commandments. However, her unwavering adherence to these moral ideals leaves her vulnerable to exploitation. Shen Te, the "good person" favored by the gods, epitomises good qualities, such as mercy, kindness, and altruism-all in line with divine commands. However, it is precisely this kind of rigidity to stick to the moral standards that puts her at risk of being exploited. In buying a tobacco shop with her bounty from the gods, she begins the acts of kindness to be generous about sheltering and helping everybody in need: she befriends the wretched among her poor neighbours. She brings one destitute family after the other to share her simple home. Her act of generosity without being practical turns out to be her financial undoing.

Her vulnerability is most apparent in her relationship with Yang Sun, a failed pilot who takes advantage of her love and trust. Yang Sun convinces Shen Te to lend him money, almost forcing her to sell her tobacco shop to finance his dream of flying again. He takes little consideration for her sacrifices while he plays on her emotions. However, in the disguise of Shui Ta, she gains control of the situation. As Shui Ta, she does not let Yang Sun take advantage of her again and insists that he should repay his debts. In guise of Shui Ta, She makes him work in her tobacco shop to clear off the loan that he owes her. Thus, Shui Ta represents the pragmatic part of Shen Te who tries to protect her interest and regain control over herself.

Shui Ta emerges as the alter ego of Shen Te, a necessary survival mechanism. She uses this masculine, pragmatic identity to enforce boundaries and reclaim control over her life. For instance, when her tenants refuse to pay rent and exploit her generosity, it is Shui Ta who steps in to demand payment and evict those who do not comply. Similarly, Shui Ta negotiates hard-nosed business deals to stabilise the tobacco shop, proving that ruthlessness is often necessary to thrive in a self-serving society.


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This duality, therefore, is not only an individual struggle but also an observation of the rigidity of hegemonic ideologies. The kindness of Shen Te corresponds to the ideals imposed by the divine commandments, whereas the practicality of Shui Ta reflects the adaptability required for a complex power play. Such an interesting moment is when Shui Ta has to deal with the workers in Shen Te's shop, focusing more on efficiency and profit over sympathy. While this approach ensures survival, it alienates Shen Te's moral identity, highlighting the sacrifices required to succeed in a corrupt world.

Through these contrasting personas, Brecht reveals the inadequacies of absolute morality. A world shaped by exploitation would not be able to sustain Shen Te's kindness, at the same time Shui Ta's pragmatism challenges the audience, questioning whether rigid ethical systems can address such harsh realities. By depicting Shen Te and Shui Ta as two sides of the same person, Brecht emphasises the hybridity of morality, which must balance ethical integrity with practical realism to survive. This duality allows the audience to critically analyse whether rigid moral systems are sustainable in an ever-changing and sometimes unjust society, exemplifying contextualism—the notion that morality and truth are not fixed but depend on the societal and situational context.

Through this binary opposition, Brecht critiques the ideological critique of rigid moral systems, wondering whether universal moral principles like the Ten Commandments would apply in such a badly broken and unjust world. At such situation, the subversion of moral commandments is enacted by Shui Ta. Shen Te's kindness, based on such universal ideals, fails to protect her in a world ruled by exploitation. Shui Ta's coming symbolises the need for a more flexible, adaptive morality to deal with the intricate web of power dynamics within society. By forcing the audience to come to terms with such tensions, Brecht points out that morality cannot be absolute; it needs to grow with the demands and challenges of the real world, and in so doing, critiques cultural relativism.

**The Central Moral Dilemma: Shen Te's Goodness vs. Survival in a Corrupt World, Through the Lens of Hegemony**

The moral dilemma in *The Good Person of Szechwan*—Shen Te's goodness versus her survival—can be set within the concept of hegemony, as conceptualised by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony refers to the dominance of a particular group not by force but through cultural, moral, and ideological leadership that moulds the norms and values


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of society. It makes sure that the ruling class's worldview becomes the "common sense" of society, often to the detriment of marginalised or oppressed groups. In the context of Brecht's play, the gods, moral laws, and societal structures represent hegemonic forces that maintain a moral order indifferent to the lived realities of the oppressed.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony aligns with Shen Te's predicament. The gods impose rigid moral ideals symbolised by the Ten Commandments, attempting to sustain a hegemonic worldview where "goodness" is universal and uncompromising. However, as Brecht reveals, these commandments are impractical and oppressive in a corrupt society, especially for someone like Shen Te, whose goodness is continuously exploited by those in positions of relative power.

The Ten Commandments are moral principles given to Moses by God in the Bible (Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:4–21) and a set of commandments meant to govern men's behaviour and uphold order and divine law. As such, these commandments are universal in their applications and aim at creating a society based on morality. The gods hope that Shen Te's deeds will prove that these ideals can survive and flourish even in the harshest conditions. The Ten Commandments include:

1. **Worship only God**: "You shall have no other gods before Me
2. **Do not make idols**: Avoid worshipping man-made images or symbols.
3. **Respect God's name**: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."
4. **Keep the Sabbath holy**: Rest and worship on the seventh day.
5. **Honour your parents**: Show respect and care for your father and mother.
6. **Do not murder**: Preserve the sanctity of life.
7. **Do not commit adultery**: Be faithful in marriage.
8. **Do not steal**: Respect others' property.
9. **Do not bear false witness**: Avoid lying or giving false testimony.
10. **Do not covet**: Refrain from desiring what belongs to others.

These commandments are presented as the epitome of moral order, and the gods' hope. Gods in the play hope that Shen Te will be able to embody those principles and show the world how divine law may still survive in a society teeming with injustice and exploitation. However, the strict application of these laws in such a society is impractical. The survival of Shen Te requires a more elastic concept of morality. Shen Te's good deeds are consistently manipulated by


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others, which prompts her to question whether it is possible to live with such ideals in a world that seems to require compromise just to survive. The inflexibility of such morality laws, as seen through the expectations of the gods, has come to be a hindrance instead of a means to justice or equity.

Shen Te's travails also demonstrate her "othering" within the hegemonic moral landscape. As a "good person," she is an oddity in a rotten world. She is ostracised because of the values she espouses, and not being those which have been nurtured by society's power structures. Her good deeds leads her to her own misery, and she has to lead a double life-the idealistic Shen Te and the pragmatic Shui Ta. This duality unmasks the hypocrisy of hegemonic ideologies that demand moral perfection from individuals but meanwhile enable systemic exploitation.

In them, one can see the moral hegemony of the world seeking a good person. They impose the Ten Commandments, which reflect a conception of morality as a static, universal, and impossible standard that cannot account for the complexities of a corrupt world. Hegemony by Gramsci is applicable here; the gods have tried to maintain the moral order without questioning the societies that make survival difficult, such as in the case of Shen Te. Rather than considering the contextual reality that surrounds her existence, she is seen through the filter of moral absolutism by the gods.

The corrupt characters of the landlady and the judges who can be bribed to deliver judgement represent those who succeed in the hegemonic order by perpetuating and being beneficiaries of the inequalities established within the hegemonic structure. These self-centerd figures function on serving their own interest for gaining more power and money rather than being concerned about morality. These figures represent the impracticality of gods' commandments in the system that rewards corruption intrinsically. For example, the landlady's demand for rent from Shen Te, who was struggling financially, reflects how, in a capitalistic society, even basic needs such as shelter are commodified. Similarly, the bribed judges reflect the failure of justice when it is subject to wealth and influence. These characters exploit Shen Te similarly to the larger societal dynamics where power and profit supersede the moral ideals that the Ten Commandments signify.

The gods themselves, while seemingly portraying moral authority, are an extension of the corrupt elite. Their quest to discover a "good person" is less of a genuine effort to help society and more of an attempt to legitimate their commandments and thus continue to dominate. They


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close their eyes to the suffering of Shen Te and the need for Shui Ta; they are insensitive to human life. As Brecht once said, when one begins to fight for survival, bread turns into one's god, and moral absolutes no longer apply.

Their inability to recognise Shui Ta's involvement in Shen Te's survival further proves their complicity in maintaining hegemonic ideals. In insisting that absolute goodness cannot be feasible in a corrupt society, Brecht criticises not only the gods but also the greater ideological systems that they symbolise.

These ideas are further enforced through lines like Shen Te's lament: "I wanted to be good, to do good, but all they did was take advantage of me." This quote is an example of how the hegemonic norms are creating exploitative dynamics by regarding altruism as a weakness and not as a virtue. Non-fiction work such as Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* supports this critique by illustrating how hegemonic ideologies prioritise the interests of the ruling class while marginalising the oppressed. Gramsci writes: "hegemony is a power which is exerted not by force, but by consent." The context in *The Good Person of Szechwan* would then see the gods and their adherence to the Ten Commandments as a means of attempting to force moral consent upon society, not accounting how material conditions determine how humans survive.

Brecht's portrayal of the gods as detached enforcers of moral absolutes aligns with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, illustrating how rigid ideologies often serve to maintain oppressive systems. Shen Te's transformation into Shui Ta demonstrates that survival in such a world requires moral fluidity and adaptability—qualities that challenge the hegemonic insistence on universal truths. By critiquing the Ten Commandments and the detached morality of the gods, Brecht calls for a nuanced ethics, one that takes into account the socio-economic and cultural context of human life. The play's relevance extends into contemporary society, where hegemonic forces demand rigid morality even as they perpetuate systemic inequality. From this perspective, Brecht challenges the relevance of divine injunctions and questions how morality should shift to accommodate the complexities of earthly problems.

**Shui Ta: The Embodiment of Practical Morality**

One of the most convincing examples of Shen Te's transformation into Shui Ta is her increasingly pragmatic approach to morality—an approach that directly challenges the absolute nature of the Ten Commandments. When Shen Te faces the challenges of survival, her alter


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ego, Shui Ta, emerges as a character who navigates the world through shrewdness, manipulation, and compromise.

An important plot point in demonstrating the utility of Shui Ta involves her taking a check from the barber, filling it excessively, and using the kindness of the barber to maintain her advantage. He himself had lent Shen Te the use of huts, so she might hold free huts for charity but expected she would marry him on the strength of his goodness. Shui Ta threatens the barber: "You give me what I need, or I will tell everyone that you tried to cheat me." This act, although unscrupulous, enables her to exert control and safeguard her interests at the cost of the moral obligation to be honest and grateful.

Further, Shui Ta converts the huts for Shen Te's charitable work into business spaces to generate income. The altruistic purpose of the huts is sidelined, revealing how practicality often overtakes idealism in her struggle to survive. This shift in purpose illustrates the necessity of bending moral expectations to meet harsh societal realities.

Another key scene arises when Wong, the water-seller, is hurt by an accident that the barber caused. Out of mercy, Shen Te initially offers to testify for the accident though she was not a witness to the incident. Being a false witness is prohibited as one of the commandment's prohibition; "Do not bear false witness" Commandment 9. After the arrival of Shui Ta, things change. Shui Ta refuses to bear witness as the profit lies in being in good terms with the barber. He says to Wong: "I can not lie for you. You have made your choices. Now you must bear the consequences of them." This refusal, while following the commandment, shows a cold pragmatism in favour of survival over sympathy, and thus reflects Brecht's criticism of moral absolutes.

Late payment to creditors of the shawl-shop again tells of Shui Ta's practicability. Shen Te wanted to pay it first because of fairness as morality. Shui Ta delayed payment by arguing: "A little delay does nobody any harm. I have lots of important things to be done." The action here described is calculated postponement- a product of her strategising the management of resources by even compromising moral ideal values.

The tension between morality and practicality intensifies with Shen Te's acts of kindness being exploited repeatedly. Everyone tries to steals from her in one way or other. Disillusioned, she laments: "I wanted to do good, I wanted to help, but all they do is take advantage of me." This


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is the moment when strict obedience to commandments like "Thou shalt not steal" (Commandment 8) sounds utterly futile in a greedy and exploitative society.

Shui Ta's final practicality is revealed when she encounters the fly-catcher, a man who took advantage of Shen Te's love and almost made her sell her tobacco shop. Shui Ta makes him pay his debt by making him work for her: "You want to keep your job? Then work for me. Pay me back, or you will be on the street." This transformation from generosity of Shen Te into the sternity of Shui Ta himself tests the requirement of giving up pedantic ideals to become adaptable and for self-preservation.

**Gods and Their Detached Morality**

The characterisation of gods in *The Good Person of Szechwan* shows Brecht's satirical condemnation of divine apathy and the impossibility of absolute moral codes in an exploitative, money-driven society. Commissioned to locate a "good person" to validate their edicts, the gods' strategy underlines their shallow perception of human woes. They merely look for a moral role model without regard for the circumstances that render such conformity nearly impossible.

When the need for money becomes a substantial issue in an unvirtuous society, ideas such as moral commandments are no longer applicable for survival. This is especially found in the lives of such poor characters in the play, like Wong who could do nothing but think about getting some food when he broke his hand, and Shen Te who had to relinquish charitable activities to save her business. As she complains, "Bread is their god," Brecht brings out the bitter truth: morality is often cast aside when basic needs are unmet. Only when hunger is satisfied, people can worry about living up to their ethics.

Conversely, the corrupt figures of wealth in Szechwan present another side of this moral dilemma. These characters are not motivated by survival but by maintaining dominance and privilege. Their godlessness arises from a constant pursuit of profit and exploitation. The landlady, for instance, demands that Shen Te pay her rent while Shen Te faces financial ruin. Similarly, the judges who accept bribes show how corruption permeates even the institutions that uphold justice. These figures embody the gods' detached pragmatism, focusing solely on their objectives while disregarding the plight of those they exploit. Brecht's critique becomes sharper through their behaviour, as they, like the gods, lack empathy and fail to recognise the systemic struggles beneath the surface of morality.


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The gods themselves reflect this jarring distance. Their search for a "good person" is more about proving right their edicts than ameliorating human conditions. As Shen Te reveals her split identity and explains why she had to become Shui Ta, the gods deny the structural ills that caused her transformation. Instead, they dismiss her tribulations and repeat their romanticised dictum: "You must be good, no matter what." Besides showing their rigidity, this also shows the inadequacy of divine morality within a corrupt world.

This critique is made deep using quotes like "The good cannot remain good in a world that is not good." To show that goodness would also be unsustainable in itself the play points at futility of rigid moral expectations amid inequality and greed of individuals. Philosophical works or ideas, as represented here by Marx about his religious critique as being an "opium of the people" support Brecht. Both indicate that the moral code may be used to placate the victim rather than address the cause of his or her oppression.

The gods' distance from human affairs leads to a disturbing paradox: they demand Shen Te's goodness but ignore Shui Ta's pragmatism, which sustains Shen Te's acts of charity. Their refusal to acknowledge Shui Ta's necessity implies that even the gods rely on pragmatism to maintain the illusion of their commandments' validity. Brecht thus raises a question if it is not the gods' duty to ensure the conditions for morality. Shouldn't they work towards making life less burdensome, filling stomachs, and reducing exploitation so that people can afford divine commandments?

In the end, Brecht condemns not only divine alienation but the more extensive societal machinery that makes people choose between survival and morality. The play claims that in a world where survival requires compromise, commandments cannot be held up without contextuality. This balance between Shen Te's innocence and Shui Ta's pragmatism underlines the need for morality to grow with human realities. Until systemic change addresses poverty, hunger, and exploitation, morality will remain a privilege accessible only to those unburdened by survival.

**Contextualism and Cultural Relativism**

Brecht's The Good Person of Szechwan challenges universal morality by trying to balance ethical behaviour within situational and cultural contexts. It is a play that criticises hegemonic


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ideologies, thus imposing rigid moral codes that make survival within an imperfect world often unattainable without becoming flexible or adaptive.

Shen Te's "Othering" as a virtuous person in Szechwan's exploitative society represents this tension. All those acts of charity- sheltering the homeless, donating food, lending money to the needy make her an anomaly. Those acts of kindness are then turned against her, resulting in her financial and emotional ruin. Her goodness becomes a weakness rather than a virtue, demonstrating how societal structures have been set up to encourage selfishness rather than altruism.

On the other hand, Shui Ta's practicality redefines morality as fluid and situational. Through the character of Shui Ta, Shen Te subverts hegemonic ideals by being a hybrid morality that balances ethical intent with pragmatic survival. For example, Shui Ta's refusal to bear false witness for Wong, even though he upholds the moral commandment against lying, reflects a calculated decision to prioritise long-term stability over immediate empathy. This shift from idealism to pragmatism subverts the traditional notion of "goodness" as absolute and repositions it in a context-sensitive construct.

Through these examples, Brecht demonstrates that morality is a fluid, dynamic response to reality rather than a set-in-stone, universal truth. The conflict between the idealism of Shen Te and the pragmatism of Shui Ta illuminates the need for hybrid ethics in facing up to a flawed society.

**Relevance to Modern Society**

The moral dilemmas in *The Good Person of Szechwan* strongly resonate with the contemporary social issues of capitalism, inequality, and ethical compromises. When the world is driven by the motive of profit and systemic inequalities, the challenges that Shen Te faces are similar to those of people trying to maintain their ethical standards within environments that encourage exploitation and greed.

For instance, contemporary capitalism sometimes forces individuals and institutions to pursue efficiency and profit above all else, much like the pragmatic behaviour of Shui Ta. The idea that people must live according to strict moral codes, like the Ten Commandments, becomes increasingly unworkable in pluralistic and pragmatic societies. The point that Brecht makes


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against such moral absolutes is that they fail to provide solutions to problems like wealth inequality, exploitation of labour, and systemic injustice.

Brecht's work, in essence, promotes a subtle ethics approach by urging for integrity and realism to coexist. While Shen Te would not have survived without the pragmatic approach of Shui Ta, modern societies should take up hybrid ethical frameworks that integrate moral ideals and practical realities. Brecht's context-sensitive morality has, in fact, given a critical view to examine contemporary struggles by urging people to question the relevance of rigid moral systems in a changing world.

**Conclusion**

Brecht's The Good Person of Szechwan posits that morality has to be adaptive and context-sensitive to the complexities of human society. By critiquing the gods' detached commandments and showing Shen Te's transformation into Shui Ta, the play makes it clear that rigid moral codes cannot prevail in a flawed world.

Ultimately, Brecht's ideological critique reveals that survival and ethical behaviour demand flexibility, blending moral integrity with practical realism. The play's themes continue to resonate in modern contexts, challenging us to navigate the delicate balance between morality and pragmatism in our own lives. Through this nuanced exploration of ethics, Brecht leaves us with a powerful reflection on the ever-changing nature of truth and morality in a deeply imperfect world.

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