

Wednesday, 2 August 2023

filmosofia at Rozz-Tox

The Prestige (2006 Nolan, dir.) & *Reasons and Persons* (1984, Parfit)

Agenda:

- pre-screening discussion starts 6:30pm
- film starts 7:00pm
- 10 minute break
- post-screening discussion of Parfit reading selection and film from 9:20pm to 10:00pm

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about filmesofia series:
 - each month we will screen a film, and pair the film screening with a famous philosophical text (about 20 pages or so) that examines themes related to that film
 - most selections will concern metaphysical topics, although some will concern value theory (axiology)
 - four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics
 - epistemology
 - axiology
 - logic
 - I will print copies of the reading selection each month, which will be available in the front of the cafe for free

- next month's selection by David Lewis on the paradoxes of time travel (1976) are available at the front, and will be paired with a screening of Cameron's *The Terminator*
- remarks about tonight's film screening and this month's reading selection:
 - the film is a work of historical fiction/science fiction about two rival magicians (no spoilers; that's enough)
 - the theme for tonight's screening, coinciding with the reading selection from Parfit's famous book *Reasons and Persons* (1984) is metaphysics, i.e., the theory of reality
 - specific focus for tonight's viewing is the metaphysical question of persons, sometimes referred to as the topic of "personal identity"
 - distinction between qualitative and numerical identity
 - qualitative identity: two objects are qualitatively identical iff they have all the same properties
 - numerical identity: x and y are numerically identical iff they are one and the same object
 - our topic is numerical identity, not qualitative identity

- the topic that both the film and the reading explores is the question “what makes you the same person over time?”
 - diachronic puzzle: what are the criteria for determining the numerical identity of a person over time? (persistence over time)
 - synchronic puzzle: what are the features that allow us to specify the nature of a person at a time?
- finally, both the film and the reading heavily feature the use of teleportation booths to raise questions about the diachronic puzzle of personal identity.
 - what do we think about the persistence of the main characters, given the use of the teleportation apparatus? (again, no spoilers)
 - what might thinking about the use of such devices tell us about our own persistence over time, even in ordinary, non-teleportation scenarios?

Post-screening discussion (9:20pm to 10:00pm)

- There are many topics worth discussing in *The Prestige*, and I wanted to pick the most directly relevant 20 or so pages from Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*. There’s so much more that I wanted

to share, but I didn't want to overload you—for more, definitely check out the rest of his book, especially “Part Three: Personal Identity”.

- From the film: lots of mirroring and echoes throughout—let's focus on the question of personal identity that we started with in the pre-screening discussion.
 - What is the nature of a person? (general synchronic question)
 - More specifically: is Borden two people or one person composed of two human beings?
 - What are the conditions for a person's persistence over time, especially in unusual teleportation scenarios? (general diachronic question)
 - More specifically: does Angier die each night of the final show, or does he continue to persist through the copy that exists after the show?
- The questions above from the film presuppose some concepts sketched in the reading:
 - What do you think of the two main criteria that Parfit lays out?
 - The Physical Criterion (p204)
 - The Psychological Criterion (p207)

- both belong to the REDUCTIONIST (p210) picture—there is a way to give an “impersonal” description of the relevant facts of personal identity
- Do you prefer this, or a Non-Reductionist view?
 - What about the “Further Fact View”? (p210)
 - Do you think that the film supports any of these positions?
- Finally, what do you make of Parfit’s own view (not in the selection for this month—p262) that “identity is not what matters”
 - instead, he argues that something like “psychological connectness” or “psychological continuity” is what matters (cf. p206).
 - “divided mind” scenarios, fission- and fusion-cases show that personal identity cannot be had on any criterion.
 - yet psychological continuity or connectedness can be had, even if in limited ways
 - Parfit argues that in fact, we don’t need sci-fi scenarios to see this—all of these points apply to us in normal, non-teleportation scenarios, too.

- Our own bodies replace the materials that make them up over time (roughly seven years), and our memories, personality, etc. changes too.
- Thus, our continued existence is not relevantly different from the teleportation scenarios.
 - in other words, Parfit's arguments in Chapter 12 show that the "no self" view is true, even for us.
 - returning to the teletransporter case, at the start of our reading this month, he says that "being destroyed and Replicated is about as good as ordinary survival." (p201)
 - what do you think of that?