Wednesday, 6 September 2023
filmosofia at Rozz-Tox
The Terminator (1984 Cameron, dir.) & "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" (1976, David Lewis)

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

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about filmosofia 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 Samuel Scheffler on meaning and value in life (2012) are available at the front, and will be paired with a screening of Cuaron's *Children of Men* (2006).

- remarks about tonight's film screening and this month's reading selection:

    - ○ is time travel possible? –ambiguous question

        - ■ nomological possibility (A): what's possible according to the laws of nature

        - ■ logical/metaphysical/conceptual possibility (B): what's possible even if the laws of nature were different

    - ○ is time travel nomologically possible?

        - ■ not a question for the armchair (philosopher)--it's an empirical issue

            - consult your local physicist–requires empirical (observational) support

    - ○ is time travel logically possible?

- this is a question for the philosopher–it's a matter of conceptual matter concerning the logical relations between the ideas themselves

  ○ Lewis addresses some concerns that time travel is not logically possible, primarily the "Grandfather paradox"--how does that go again? In well-crafted form:

1. Assume time travel is possible.
2. If it is, then one can can kill one's grandfather before he has conceived one's father.
3. If one did that, then one wouldn't exist in order to kill one's grandfather.
4. If one wouldn't exist in order to kill one's grandfather, then one cannot kill one's grandfather in this way.
5. One has the ability to pull a trigger in order to shoot someone in some past moment.
6. If that's true, then one can kill one's grandfather in this way.
7. But it's impossible that one can and one cannot kill one's grandfather in this way.
8. Therefore, time travel is not possible. (*reductio ad absurdum*)

  ○ Lewis's response to this argument? There is an equivocation in the word "can".

  - in one sense, I can speak Finnish while a chimpanzee cannot–I have the requisite vocal anatomy and neurophysiology to (eventually) learn Finnish while a chimp doesn't.

- - ■ in another sense, I can't speak Finnish–I haven't learned it yet!

  - ○ So, Lewis aims to show us that time travel is (logically) possible, against challenges of this sort.

  - ○ The Terminator (1984) features a time travel story–is it logically possible?

    - ■ There aren't internal contradictions, or so I maintain…more after the screening (cf. Sider's "Time" in *Riddles of Existence*, Oxford UP 2012).

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

- Is the film logically coherent?

  - ○ one potential worry: why would Skynet send someone back in time to kill Sarah Connor if they follow David Lewis in his view that the past is fixed?

    - ■ That's a question of motivations, and who knows? Maybe it had reasons to diverge from Lewis's view about the past, or maybe it's simply mistaken in that view, etc.

- ■ The important upshot is that the film tells a story about an entity that travels back in the past and basically sows the seeds for its own future existence.

    - ● this is an instance of the "bootstrapping" puzzle that Lewis touched on

    - ● that's a weird loop, but not an inconsistency, not a contradiction

    - ● As Lewis says repeatedly, a world with time travel would be much stranger than one without, but that doesn't show it's impossible.

- ● Is the film more coherent than its sequels? I argue it is. Here's a sketchy argument:

1. Terminator 1 (1984) is logically coherent. (above)
2. Terminator 2 (1991) is logically coherent iff any of the other sequels are.
3. Terminator 2 presents a story in which the characters "change the past to change the future" by altering events in the present depiction of the course of the film.
4. If determinism is true, then any given state of affairs is necessitated by the past state of affairs and the laws of nature. (definitional)
5. If that's so, then determinism does not permit "changing the past to change the future".
6. Thus, if a story involves "changing the past to change the future", then it has an indeterministic framework. (4 and 5)
7. An indeterministic framework for time-travel stories will involve alternate branches moving forward into the future.
8. If that's so, then a story in which the characters "change the past to change the future" will be one in which the inhabitants in the present are not altering their future but are instead on a different branch along a different future timeline.
9. Thus, Terminator 2 is a story in which the characters arrive a future that is different from their own. (3 and 8)
10. However, Terminator 2 presents a story where the characters aim to alter their future, not merely arrive at a different future.
11. Therefore, Terminator 2 is not logically coherent.
12. Thus, Terminator 1 is more coherent than any of its sequels. (1, 2, and 11)