

Wednesday, 18 December 2024

filmosofia 7 at Rozz-Tox

The Dark Knight (2008 Nolan, dir.) &

“The Prisoner’s Dilemma and Social Theory” (Pettit 1985)¹

Agenda:

- pre-screening discussion (about 6:30pm)
- film starts 7:00pm
- 10 minute break
- post-screening discussion of Pettit reading selection and film from 9:45pm to 10:45pm

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about filmesofia series:
 - roughly every other month we screen a film and we pair it with a famous philosophical text that examines themes related to that film
 - the 2025 filmesofia schedule is now posted on instagram (and soon on the Rozz-Tox website); stay tuned for updates about the 2025 philosophy pub lineup
 - the first filmesofia screening will be Lynch’s (2001) *Mulholland Drive*, and the reading will be Carroll’s (1991) “The Nature of Horror”: Wednesday 26 February
 - instagram: @rozztox_qc & @casuallyineffacious
 - free print articles for filmesofia will be in the usual place, in the front of the cafe
- More details on the four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics: the theory of reality
 - notable sub-fields: ontology (the study of what exists), philosophy of mind (theory of the nature of consciousness)
 - epistemology: the theory of knowledge
 - notable sub-fields: analysis of ‘knowledge’ (challenges to the “Justified True Belief” model), debates over the a priori vs. a posteriori justification (whether there is justification independent of experience)
 - axiology: the theory of value
 - notable sub-fields: normative ethics (theory of right/wrong), aesthetics (theory of good/bad art)
 - logic: the theory of right reasoning
 - notable sub-fields: classical logic (modern formal theory of entailment), non-classical logics (formal theories that reject assumptions in classical

¹ Pettit, P. (1985) “The Prisoner’s Dilemma and Social Theory.” *Politics/Australian Journal of Political Science*. 20:1-11.

logic, such as the principle of explosion (*ex falso quodlibet*) in paraconsistent logics)

- tonight's topic: political philosophy & philosophical anthropology
 - I have two main agendas after watching the film:
 - connecting the dots to (a) the Prisoner's Dilemma from Game Theory (branch of mathematics and philosophy) and (b) social contract theory (this is where the Pettit article comes in)²
 - examining the debate between the Joker and Batman on human nature: there are clear echoes of the classical conservative view (Hobbes) and the classical liberal view (Rousseau).³
- some qualifications: what I am not aiming to cover tonight:
 - I'm not interested in examining writer/director's goals—there are plenty of good video essays about the classist assumptions that the Nolans are using here.
 - I'm also not interested in a comparison between the Phillips/Phoenix *The Joker* films and Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy.
 - I do not aim to examine psychological assessments of the Joker or Batman (e.g., psychopath, sociopath, antisocial personality disorder, etc.); again, there are pretty good video essays on YouTube devoted to those topics.

Post-Screening Discussion (9:45pm)

- tonight's topic: political philosophy (off-shoot of axiology) & human nature (metaphysics)
 - political philosophy is often concerned with large themes, such as Justice, Rights, Distributive/Economic Justice, etc.
 - as many of those themes are normative (i.e., prescriptive, concerning the way things *should* be), there is a direct connection to axiology
 - Plato's *Republic*⁴ is an important starting point in the history of Western thought, though tonight's discussion will largely center on ideas from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*⁵ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*⁶.

² for more, see Rachels and Rachels. "The Social Contract Theory." in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 7th ed. McGraw Hill. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-07-803824-2.

³ for more, see Pojman. "Classical Conservative and Liberal Theories of Human Nature: Hobbes and Rousseau." in *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature*. Oxford University Press. 2005. ISBN: 978-0195179279.

⁴ You can find translations or editions online for free, but not all such copies are of equally high quality. I recommend the Hackett editions, as they are affordable and come from editors/translators that are reputable; Penguin Classics editions are good, too. Plato. *The Republic*. Grube & Reeve, trans. Hackett. 1992. ISBN: 978-0872201361.

⁵ Hobbes. *Leviathan*. Hackett. 1994. ISBN: 978-0872201774.

⁶ Rousseau. *On The Social Contract*. Hackett. 2019. ISBN: 978-1624667855.

- The Prisoner's Dilemma: classic puzzle from decision & game theory (branch of logic)
 - suppose you and your friend (Smith) are arrested on made-up charges
 - the District Attorney tells you these five things (slightly different from Pettit's version):

(A) If you confess but Smith stays silent, you'll get out immediately and Smith'll get 10 years.

(B) If you both stay silent, you'll both only get one year.

(C) If you both confess, you'll both get 5 years.

(D) If Smith confesses but you stay silent, Smith'll get out immediately but you'll get 10 years.

(E) I've been told all the same information.

- Suppose we can't communicate: what's the RATIONAL thing to do here?
- Look at each possibility that's outside of your control one at a time (Column 1, then Column 2).
- draw up a matrix:

	Column 1 ↓ Smith Confess	Column 2 ↓ Smith Silent
You Confess	Y: 5y / S: 5y (C)	Y: 0y / S: 10y (A)
You Silent	Y: 10y / S: 0y (D)	Y: 1y / S: 1y (B)

- Note that from the point of view of what you can control, confessing gives you the better outcome
 - If Smith confesses (Column 1), then your choices are to stay silent (10 years) or confess (5 years)
 - If Smith stays silent (Column 2), then your choices are to stay silent (1 year) or confess (0 years)
 - Either way, it's better for you to confess. (confessing "dominates")
 - However, since Smith is rational, Smith will reason the same way, which means you'll both 5 years (situation C, the third best of four outcomes)
- Note also that if you both had an agreement, you could COOPERATE, and get only 1 year (situation B, the second best outcome!)

- That's the metaphor for society:
 - The social contract is a way to cooperate, provided that the agreement can be enforced (government, the "Leviathan" according to Hobbes).
 - Otherwise, we'd follow dominance reasoning and end up in the "state of nature", or to use Hobbes's term "the state of war, of all against all" (analogous to the 5 years result).
 - Hobbes famously describes life in this state as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".
- Finally, note the nod to the Prisoner's Dilemma with the two boat scenario at the end.
 - it used to bug me that the scenario doesn't quite fit the prisoner's dilemma, but it appears that the writer is playing with Hobbes, the social contract theory, etc., so perhaps it's just an artistic allusion
- Hobbes vs Rousseau on the Social Contract and Human Nature
 - The main thing I wanted to address is the Joker's view of human nature, and how that relates to Hobbes's view
 - Hobbes helped to popularize the social contract theory, but he assumes a distinctive view of humanity: in his view, human beings are self-interested and in the absence of an enforced agreement, they are capable of violence
 - *nota bene*: Thrasymachus and Glaucon argue for a very similar view in Plato's *Republic*
 - This is basically the view that the Joker argues for throughout the film: especially when he calls the public's "morality" or "code" a "bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble...these civilized people will eat each other"
 - the state of nature, Hobbes's state of "war"
 - By contrast, Rousseau thinks that people are generally amiable, but that government, property, and science brings out the worst in us.
 - for Rousseau, the state of nature would be more peaceful, not "war"
 - Hobbes and the Joker might subscribe to psychological egoism: the view that humans are always and only motivated by self-interest

- Note that psychological egoism is an empirical hypothesis, aiming to provide a descriptive account of human nature
 - as such, it appears to fail Karl Popper's basic methodological criterion of falsifiability⁷: for an empirical claim to make a testable prediction, it must be the case that the prediction can be falsifiable in principle (specify conditions under which it would be false).⁸
- Batman, by contrast, seems to endorse Rousseau's view of human nature: "these people ...are ready to believe in good"
 - Who's right?
 - Furthermore, if the Joker is right about human nature, does that help his case regarding society? Is it all just a "bad joke"?
- Huemer and the Problem of Political Authority (stay tuned: filosofia 27 August)
 - Huemer is well-known for arguing that the state doesn't have the authority that it/we pretend it has.
 - Philosophical Anarchism: the state lacks legitimate authority
 - often such views rely on less bleak views of human nature than Hobbes or the Joker, though
 - they often appeal to ideas of the decency of humanity (so, in this respect, they share views more similar to Rousseau's about human nature)
- Is the Joker an Anarchist? YES, though not in a way that is similar to Huemer or other philosophical anarchists
 - An argument for the claim that the Joker is an anarchist:
 1. Definitional premise: philosophical anarchism is the view that the state lacks legitimate authority.
 2. The Joker insists that the "established order" should be "upset", and that civilized society rests on a "bad joke", which means it should be rejected. (motivations for anarchism appear to be rooted in a desire to bring about "chaos")
 3. If anyone insists that the established order should be upset and that civilized society should be rejected, then that person subscribes to the view that the state lacks legitimate authority.
 4. So, the Joker is an anarchist.

⁷ Popper. *Conjectures and Refutations*. Routledge. 2002. ISBN: 978-0415285940.

⁸ for more, see Rachels and Rachels. "Ethical Egoism." in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 7th ed. McGraw Hill. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-07-803824-2.

- Is the Joker a nihilist? NO
 - An argument for the claim that the Joker is not a nihilist:
 1. Definitional premise: nihilism is the view that nothing matters and life is essentially meaningless.
 2. If someone believes that it is “pathetic” when people try to control things and they try to show them that it is pathetic, then they believe that they know something is true and they value the truth. (also, values showing that people are phony in their efforts to pretend to be moral)
 3. If someone believes that something is “just too much fun”, then they value what is fun over what is not fun.
 4. The Joker believes that it is pathetic when people try to control things, and he tries to show them that such efforts are pathetic; moreover, the Joker believes that Batman is “just too much fun”.
 5. So, the Joker is not a nihilist.

- Is Batman a fascist? MAYBE⁹
 - An argument that Batman is a fascist:
 1. Definitional premise: facism is a form of authoritarianism that is committed to a strong image of order even at the violation of individual rights.
 2. Using surveillance to preserve one’s view of rightness is a violation of individual rights.
 3. Wearing bat-themed costumes and using military-grade equipment to enforce one’s vision of justice is a strong image in the service of authority.
 4. Batman does the things in (2) and (3).
 5. So, Batman is a fascist.

⁹ cf. Stanley. *How Fascism Works*. Random House. 2018. ISBN: 978-0-525-51183-0. I think that Stanley’s formulation of fascism is much better than the one in this argument, and that his conception of fascism would not support the first premise. Still, I include the argument (even though I don’t endorse it) because it fits with some of the discourse I’ve seen about Batman, both in the comics and in Nolan’s trilogy.