

This is an edited transcript of a lecture, given by Nick Pollard, at the Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo on 2 September 2003, as part of the launch of Damaris Norway.

In the preface to the book *Beyond the Fringe* I tell the story of three people with whom I feel as if I have become friends in recent years. You may find that you recognise them.

Bridget is thirty-something. She is bright, creative and successful and has just started a great new job in television production. She spends her evenings eating and drinking with her friends and looks as if she has it all. But most nights she records in her diary her sense of failure and despair. She is desperate to find a man who will be truly committed to her - instead of just using her and leaving her. She lurches from torrid affair to pregnancy scare. She worries about dying alone and being eaten by an Alsatian dog. She is convinced that if only she could get down to 8st 7lb, stop smoking and give up Lottery Instantants then all would be fine.

Rob is about the same age. Some years ago he dropped out of university and into a dead-end job running a second-hand record shop. He can't keep a girlfriend and life seems hopeless. He says, 'Life is like some film where the money ran out, and there are no sets, or locations, or supporting actors, and it's just one bloke on his own staring into the camera with nothing to do and nobody to speak to.' Like Bridget, he is afraid of dying.

Elizabeth is more scared of living than dying. 'One morning you wake up afraid you are going to live,' she says. Like Bridget, Elizabeth parties and drinks a lot. She also takes many different drugs. But none of these can relieve her feeling of hopelessness and depression. 'No one will ever love me. I will live and die alone' she says.

Did you recognise any of them? Let's take them in reverse order:

Elizabeth is Elizabeth Wurtzel, the author of *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America*. This memoir tells of her battle with depression and explores her generation's struggle to navigate through the effects of family break-up, drink, drugs and sex. A bestseller as a book, it was made into a film starring Nina Ricci and Anne Heche by Erik Skjoldbjærg (2001).

Rob is Rob Fleming, the rather sad character at the centre of Nick Hornby's book *High Fidelity* - again a bestseller which became a very popular film starring John Cusack (dir. Stephen Frears, 2000).

And, of course, **Bridget** is *Bridget Jones* - the eponymous heroine of book and film (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001).

Bridget, Rob and Elizabeth are not unusual. In many ways they are quite typical of people living in today's world. As they struggle with life they search for answers to the big questions of meaning, purpose and fulfilment. 'How can I be happy?' 'How can I be free?' 'How can I be loved?' These are philosophical and spiritual questions - and where will they look for the answers?

Traditionally, most philosophical investigation took place in universities, and most spiritual reflection took place in churches. However, in recent years that seems to have changed. Now, arguably, most philosophical investigation and spiritual reflection takes place in the cinema.

In fact, there are many similarities between cinema and church. When someone goes to the cinema they join with many others, who sit together in rows and share a common experience. They laugh together, they cry together. They engage with a story that is told from the front - a story that carries with it an underlying message, a worldview. This has an effect upon their beliefs and values. So when they leave they are a different in some way. Some films (and some church services) have only a very small effect upon people, whilst others can have a major impact. But all of the effects, large or small, build together to shape the person philosophically and spiritually, as they return week after week.

This can take place at quite a deep level since, increasingly, contemporary films are exploring some very profound and complex philosophical and spiritual questions. Steven Spielberg's film *Minority Report* illustrates this.

The year is 2054; the place is the Department of Pre-crime in Washington. Here live three eerie people, floating in a water-tank with their brains wired to a computer. They are 'pre-cogs' - people with powers to see future events - particularly traumatic ones such as murder. In one scene in the film, pre-cogs visualise scenes from a murder that will happen very soon, somewhere in Washington. These scenes are displayed on a large computer screen so that a detective (played by Tom Cruise) can identify the location and send the police to arrest the murderer before he actually commits the crime.

When the would-be murderer is arrested, he pleads, 'But I haven't done anything!' And he hasn't. Nor has Tom Cruise's character who turns out to be the next person to be identified by the pre-cogs as a future murderer. He cannot believe that he is going to kill someone and so he runs away. Thus begins some very gripping chase sequences - but that is only the gloss, the surface. The real heart of the film is the exploration of the philosophical and spiritual questions about freedom and identity. Are we able to choose our future, and thus be morally accountable for it? Or are our actions in some way determined for us?

Determinism is usually defined as 'the philosophical doctrine that every state of affairs, including every human event, act, and decision is the inevitable consequence of antecedent states of affairs.' Various different forms of determinism have been proposed over the centuries and we will see how they have all been explored in contemporary popular films.

The type of determinism which was explored in *Minority Report* is usually referred to as 'logical determinism'. This was considered by Aristotle in the ninth chapter of *De Interpretatione*. Here he responds to the 'Master Argument' which is usually attributed to Diodorus Cronus. This argument said that, because something has happened it always was going to happen, and there was, therefore, no freedom for it not to happen. Diodorus Cronus expressed the argument in terms of a sea battle. Suppose there was a sea battle yesterday. So, today, I say, 'There was a sea battle on 1 September 2003.' Then my assertion is not only true, it is necessarily true in the sense that it cannot possibly be false. If it is necessarily true, according to the Master Argument, then it has always been true. This means that it is not

only true to say it today, but it would have been true to say it yesterday, or four days ago, or four years ago, or ten thousand years ago. But if it was true to say it ten thousand years ago, then the sea battle was a fixed part of the future for that distant time, and no-one could have had any freedom to change it.^[1]

Another form of determinism is usually referred to as 'ethical determinism'. This argues that actions are determined by our knowledge of their rightness. In his book *The Republic*, Plato argues that no one could possibly do what is wrong if they know what is right. This idea has travelled through the centuries into modern education policy where it is often argued that young people do wrong things because of their ignorance of the right thing, and so the way to change their behaviour is through education. Most Christians have serious questions about this because it doesn't take account of the human tendency to do wrong even when we do know what is right. (see for example what Paul said in his letter to the Romans^[2]). However, this idea has certainly been expressed in many films. Indeed this is a common theme in a large number of films: a bad person behaves badly, until (s)he learns some moral lesson and, often at the climax of the film, carries out some good act which demonstrates the change that has taken place.

Look, for example, at the recent film *Changing Lanes*, which pitted two headstrong characters against each other. One (played by Samuel L. Jackson) is a recovering alcoholic who is trying not to lose his children. The other (played by Ben Affleck) is a lawyer who has helped to defraud a charity for the benefit of his firm, thus enabling him to become a partner and share in the rewards. Their cars and their lives literally collide and this sparks a series of disastrous revenge attacks. They seem bent on mutual self-destruction. But, gradually, they learn about one another and themselves. And they change. Their new insight has caused them to think and act differently. Plato would say that their new knowledge has brought about their new behaviour - because they now know what is right they cannot help but do it.

The psychologist B F Skinner would probably offer a slightly different explanation for the change. From years of experience of watching rats in a box he would probably argue that their behaviour was determined by the rewards and punishments that they encountered. Skinner expressed a form of 'behavioural determinism'. If a rat obtains some food by pressing a white button, but receives an electric shock from pressing a black button, then the rat will avoid any black buttons but vigorously press any white ones. This is usually referred to as operant conditioning and many psychologists and philosophers have considered to what extent human behaviour can be determined by such external circumstances and experiences.

This question was also considered in the film *The Truman Show*. The film tells the story of Truman Burbank who lives in the apparently perfect town of Seahaven - unaware that this is a massive stage set complete with a false sky, that everyone else is an actor and that his entire life is being broadcast to the millions of people who tune in each day. Truman's world is directed by the TV director Christof from his vantage point in the sky. From his birth to the present day, Truman has been controlled by the manipulation of his environment. For example, he wants to travel and explore but the show requires him to stay within Seahaven, so Truman is given the dreadful experience of watching his father drown, in order to give him an intense phobic reaction to water.

Thus the film explores whether this man can set himself free. Can he take himself out to the world beyond the sea? In the climax of the film we watch him struggle against the fear in his mind, against the storm on the water, and against the messages from Christof in the sky. Finally, he reaches the end of the film's set, climbs up the steps and goes through a door to his new life of freedom.

Thus, as the film explores 'behavioural determinism' it presents the message that our life is not determined by our environment - we can set ourselves free. The screenplay for *The Truman Show* was written by Andrew Niccol. Previously he had written the screenplay (and also directed) another film that explores another form of determinism. The determinism is called 'neurogenetic determinism', and the film is called *Gattaca*. Through this he seeks to show that our life is not determined by our genes.

Gattaca is set in the not too distant future, when the human genome project has come to fruition and when genetic engineering is commonplace. This is a world in which a woman meets a man, they kiss - and she goes straight to a chemist who takes a swab of her lips to catch the saliva in order to have the DNA analysed to assess the positive and negative attributes of her potential mate. It is a world in which pianists are genetically engineered so that they can play pieces 'that can only be played with 12 fingers'. It is a world in which police and security checks are carried out by immediate DNA analysis from blood samples.

In this world lives a character named Vincent. He was conceived by a young couple in love in the back of a car rather than in a laboratory. Thus he was destined to be a second-class citizen, along with others born in the same way, and called 'faith births' or 'degenerates' or 'invalids'. Within seconds of his birth his DNA was analysed. His parents were told that he had a 99% chance of a heart disorder and should die when he was 30.2 years old.

His parents decided to have a second son, this time through what was called 'natural birth' - a process involving careful genetic selection and manipulation. This genetically engineered the child from the best bits of the father and mother, producing a child that (this time) was good enough to take the father's name - Anton.

As the two boys grow, their struggle illustrates the struggle between 'faith births' and 'natural births'. They engage in regular swimming competitions in which they swim out to sea as far as they can, and the first to give up and swim back loses. Eventually, Vincent wins; he beats his brother but loses out in life.

No matter how hard he works, Vincent is rejected by schools and then by employers. As soon as they test his DNA they know his future health and so they reject him. He says, 'my real resume is in my cells. They have discrimination down to a science.'

Eventually Vincent becomes a cleaner at Gattaca Space Academy where he watches the rockets take off and longs to be able to fly one - a dream made impossible by his genes

So far the film has graphically presented neurogenetic determinism. This term was coined by Stephen Rose in his book *Lifelines*^[3] which sought to show the inadequacy of this biological and psychological explanation. Neurogenetic determinism is best understood as a modern extension of physical

determinism which was described by Thomas Hobbes in his classic phrase that 'nothing taketh a beginning from itself'. So, everything is determined by physical states and processes. Neurogenetic determinism stresses the deterministic importance of the state of the person's genes and the processes through which the genes build the person's biological and psychological nature.

Andrew Niccol presents a rather different view at the end of his film. Vincent decides to make the seemingly impossible become possible by 'borrowing a ladder.' He teams up with Jerome Morrow - a competition swimmer with excellent genes, who had broken his back when hit by a car and become an alcoholic. He needs money to pay for his booze so Vincent pays him and takes on his identity. Vincent dyes his hair and has coloured contact lenses fitted; he even has an operation to lengthen his legs. Each morning Vincent scrubs off all his loose skin and hairs, before sticking small patches containing Jerome's blood onto his fingertips, and strapping to his legs a bag of Jerome's urine. Thus, whenever he gives a sample, it is Jerome's DNA which is identified.

Vincent applies to train at Gattaca and finds that the interview process is nothing but a quick analysis of his urine. With genes like that he is immediately accepted and is soon scheduled for a flight to Titan. The film ends with Vincent taking off in the rocket on his flight to the stars. And the message is clear: our genes do not limit us; we can overcome our genetic limitations. In their final scene together, Jerome tells Vincent, 'I only leant you my body; you leant me your dream.'

Whatever view one takes concerning all of these variations on the philosophy of determinism, there is no doubt that modern films are exploring these ideas.

For centuries philosophers and theologians have wrestled with these issues. Today, they are joined by film makers and those who go to watch them. That is why, if we want to help others to think seriously about the big questions of life, we must engage with modern films philosophically and theologically. For those of us who are Christians, this means we need to apply both our brains and our Bibles to what we watch in the cinema.

Footnotes

1. For more information see Richard Gaskin, *The Sea Battle and the Master Argument*. Aristotle and Diodorus Cronus on the Metaphysics of the Future (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter: 1995) [[back](#)]
2. Romans 7:7-25 [[back](#)]
3. Steven Rose *Lifelines: Biology, Freedom, Determinism* (Allen Lane 1997) [[back](#)]