



The Philosopher at the End of the Universe: Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films

Mark Rowlands

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The Philosopher at the End of the Universe (second edition: *Sci-Phi*) demonstrates how anyone can grasp the basic concepts of philosophy while still holding a bucket of popcorn. Mark Rowlands makes philosophy utterly relevant to our everyday lives and reveals its most potent messages using nothing more than a little humor and the plotlines of some of the most spectacular, expensive, high-octane films on the planet.

Learn about: The Nature of Reality from *The Matrix*, Good and Evil from *Star Wars*, Morality from *Aliens*, Personal identity from *Total Recall*, The Mind-Body dilemma from *Terminator*, Free Will from *Minority Report*, Death and the Meaning of Life from *Blade Runner*, and much more. A search for knowledge about ourselves and the world around us with a star-studded cast that includes: Tom Cruise, Plato, Harrison Ford, Immanuel Kant, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigourney Weaver, Rene Descartes, and Keanu Reeves.

Rowlands anchors his discussions in easily understood everyday terms and relates them in a manner easy to identify with interspersed with a ready joke or two, he wonderfully explains why those SciFi movies we love so much are much deeper than they appear to be on the surface. Mark Rowlands's entertaining and stimulating guide is perfect for anyone searching for knowledge of the world around us. If Keanu can understand Descartes surely everyone can.

The Philosopher at the End of the Universe: Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films Details

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From Reader Review The Philosopher at the End of the Universe: Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films for online ebook

Sophie says

A very entertaining, easy to read introduction to the most important philosophical questions with intelligible explanations. I also liked that the examples from the movies don't seem that far-fetched, compared with similar books on that topic that I've read. Recommended!

Cody Sexton says

Absurdity is the defining feature of human existence.

The idea of absurdity revolves around the clash of two perspectives we have on ourselves, a view from the inside and a view from the outside. From the inside you are somebody, from the outside you are a joke. Life is ultimately meaningless, but then so is the statement that says it is, but it still remains as the most meaningful thing that will ever happen to us, a paradox.

Our lives are meaningless but in order for it to be absurd requires comprehension of its meaninglessness.

Which brings us to the central thesis, the main problem of Philosophy alluded to earlier; from the inside we find meaning and knowledge, but from the outside, we find the possibility of neither.

N Mursidi says

Belajar Filsafat Sembari Nonton Film

(sumber: kedaulatan rakyat, Minggu tanggal tidak terlacak)

Judul buku : Menikmati Filsafat Melalui Film Science-Fiction

Penulis: Mark Rowlands

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DALAM perdebatan filsafat, ada satu hal "krusial" yang selalu aktual dan jadi perdebatan tak kunjung usai; pertentangan dari dalam dan dari luar tentang cara manusia melihat dunia. Dari dalam, siapa pun akan melihat dia (manusia) adalah pusat dan sebagai tujuan. Tetapi, dilihat dari luar, semua itu ternyata tak seperti apa yang dipikirkan, tidak mungkin dan tak pasti.

Tema sentral itulah yang dijadikan kerangka oleh Mark Rowlands dalam membicarakan semua film yang dikupas dalam buku ini. Rowlands, penulis yang sudah berpengalaman mengajar mata kuliah filsafat di berbagai negara selama 15 tahun, ternyata jeli menangkap tema film dan mengaitkan dengan persoalan filsafat dengan menampilkan percikan pemikiran Rene Descartes, Aristoteles, Heraclitus, Nietzsche dan filsuf-filsuf kenamaan lain. Itulah yang kemudian menjadikan buku ini memiliki beberapa kelebihan, karena melalui media film, penulis mengajak pembaca mengarungi lautan "pemikiran filsafat" dengan bertitiktolak

dari pertentangan di atas.

Dalam film *Frankenstein*, episteme pertentangan itu adalah absurditas hidup De Nero yang dilahirkan sebagai "moster". De Nero bisa disebut sebagai moster yang tak punya pilihan saat ia telah dilahirkan dari rangkaian tubuh orang-orang yang disambungkan, tetapi setelah menjalani hidup serta dipaksa menjalani tugas sebagai moster, ia pun merasa tak beda dengan tokoh Sisipus. Seperti yang dikatakan oleh Albert Camus (1913-1960) bahwa hidup ini memang absurd. Apa yang dibayangkan De Nero dari dalam dirinya tentang hidup indah ternyata itu tak bermakna ketika dilihat dari luar. Siapa yang kemudian tak kecewa?

Seperti Neo dalam *The Matrix* yang merasa hidup yang dijalannya itu nyata, ternyata kemudian diberitahu Morpheus bahwa dunia yang dihuni bukan sebagai dunia nyata. Ya, ia hanya bisa mengelus dada. "Sial!" Tak salah jika dalam film itu, penulis mengaitkannya dengan satu pertanyaan epistemologis. "Apakah ada sesuatu hal yang benar-benar merasa pasti tentangnya?"

Hal ini, terkait dengan pengetahuan. Menjawab pertanyaan semacam itu, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) berujar, "Aku berpikir, maka aku ada (*Cogito Ergo Sum*)". Jelas, bagi Descartes, keraguan tentang dirinya tidak mungkin jika ia tak ada untuk meragukan sesuatu. Berbeda dengan David Hume (1711-1776) yang lebih melihat peran penting "status mental" dan Nietzsche (1844-1900) yang lebih berpihak pada pikiran tentang prinsip pengetahuan.

Namun, pikiran itu sendiri masih menyisakan tanda tanya lagi. Dalam *Terminator*, Arnie (Arnold Schwarzenegger) sungguh membuat siapa pun mungkin tak pernah berpikir tentang kesadaran sesosok robot! "Apa ia punya pikiran?" Jika tidak, kenapa Arnie dalam film itu tahu situasi dan merasa malu untuk menutupi tubuh agar tak telanjang? Perdebatan pikiran-tubuh, rupanya telah melahirkan aliran dualisme dan materialisme yang ujungnya tetap tidak mampu menguak apa itu kesadaran! Setidaknya, dari dua aliran itu, masih menyisakan beberapa kelemahan dalam berpikir yang timpang...

Belum cukup tema itu menguras otak siapa pun untuk berpikir jenial, hal lain yang dikemukakan Arnold-Verhoeven dalam *Total Recall* ternyata tak kalah rumit. Film ini mengeksplorasi jati diri Quaid yang kehilangan memori. Jelas, dengan hilangnya memori, Quaid tak hanya menjadi orang lain, tapi ia kehilangan jati dirinya. Sebab bagi mereka yang berpegang pada teori memori, jadi diri diakui sebagai perbedaan krusial manusia di hari ini dan hari esok serta yang membedakannya dengan makhluk lain.

Wah... bisa-bisa buku ini jadi berjilid-jilid jika saja Rowlands mau mengungkap film yang pernah ditonton dan mengaitkannya dengan tema filsafat. Sebab *Minority Report*, film yang dibintangi oleh Tom Cruise dan seolah tidak mengandung unsur filosofis ternyata di otak Rowlands dapat ditangkap masalah kehendak bebas. Juga *Hollow Man* memuat pentingnya manusia bermoral seperti pernah dibicarakan Plato (427-347 SM), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) dan David Hume (1711-1776). Juga, film *Independence day & Aliens* dan *Star Wars* yang berbicara cakupan moral, kebaikan dan kejahatan. Kecuali film *Blade Runner*, menyodokkan tema kematian dan makna hidup.

Buku ini, jelas tak saja sebuah buku bagus. Lebih dari itu, termasuk buku pertama dalam genre sci-phi. Sebuah buku yang berbicara tentang isu dan perdebatan di bidang filsafat yang memanfaatkan media film science-fiction. Berbeda dengan Jostein Gaarder, yang menulis "sejarah filsafat" lewat media novel dengan menghasilkan *Dunia Sophi* dan bisa memikat pembaca sehingga tak bosan untuk belajar filsafat, Rowlands mengail di dunia film untuk kemudian berbincang tema filsafat yang juga tak kalah menarik. Dengan itu, siapapun pasti tak akan jemu dan menyerngitkan dahi saat nonton film, sementara dari alur cerita itu sembari belajar materi dan konsep sentral filsafat.

Sayang, Rowlands terlalu bertele-tele dalam memberikan penjelasan. Bahkan, analogi yang kerap dicomot dalam rangka untuk memperkuat pelbagai argumentasi yang disemburkan juga cukup berlimpah sehingga pembaca dibuat seperti berputar-putar dulu, tak langsung point pembahasan. Mungkin Rowlands kurang padat kata, malah disertakan pula sedikit humor.

Tapi, apa boleh buat! Itulah filsafat. Segalanya kadang dibutuhkan jawaban dengan argumentasi bertele, muter-muter, didukung alasan yang kuat dan terperinci. Apalagi, Rowlands bisa mengolah semua itu dengan bahan lain yang kaya tentang fisika, biologi dan bidang lain lagi. Wow..., sebuah buku filsafat yang sungguh memikat! Karena, filsafat --yang selama ini-- dianggap angker diperkenalkan Rowlands lewat media film.***

*) n. mursidi, alumnus Filsafat UIN, Yogyakarta

Robert Day says

It seems like, from my chapter by chapter progress reports, (see below (unless goodreads has rearranged stuff)) that I really enjoyed and engaged with this book, so it's slightly puzzling that I only gave it four stars.

I love the premise of the book - that it is possible to use Science Fiction movies as an aid to understanding certain aspects of philosophy. I love this not just because it's more engaging to study philosophy by watching movies, but because I genuinely feel that there are deeper ways to enjoy Hollywood blockbusters than relishing the alien blood splatter patterns or piggy-backing on the adrenalin rush of the big guy running about on screen. The author seems to agree with me, despite his tongue in cheek treatment of Big Arnie as being the finest Austrian philosopher extant.

I think the reason the book drops a star is because the author portrays philosophy as being so darned depressing!

Words can be used in oh so many ways - to heal, to harm or just to entertain, but I think it's a shame that most of the philosophical words I've read seem intent on deconstructing the things that make us feel good (free will, consciousness, central place in things) and I think that's harmful.

After all, no-one really, really knows the real meaning or basis of reality - and any attempts to explain it are just scratching at the surface with no chance of ever reaching any depth.

Even a cursory look at the movie 'The Matrix' shows that any philosophical attempt to divine the nature of our day-to-day experience might well be entertaining, in a limited way, but can only look at the way things *appear* to be rather than the way they *really are*.

So why not just kick back and enjoy the ride?!

And if philosophers just *have* to write books purporting to explain the meaning of life, then make it a *happy* meaning!

Happy explanations probably won't be any more (or less) true, but at least people will have fun reading and living them.

Either that, or stick to watching movies.

Alison says

I think I could easily put this into my top five favorite books ever...or at least slot it among those that had the biggest impact on my life. I picked it up out of curiosity from the "new" section of our local library years ago. It seemed like a good fit; I love science fiction films, and I've long had a passing interest in philosophy, without actually being familiar with all the "greats."

The book is written in an easy, conversational style by current professor of Philosophy at the University of Miami Mark Rowlands, previously of the University of Hertfordshire in the U.K. Professor Rowlands walks the reader through a number of popular science fiction films and explains how their core messages relate to certain philosophers or philosophical ideas, including his own. Examples include comparing Frankenstein's monster to the absurdity of life, dwelling in particular on French existentialist Albert Camus' take on the Greek myth of Sisyphus, that poor fellow doomed to roll a rock up a hill for all eternity. He uses the *Terminator* movies to explain the difference between dualism and materialism, and the mind-body problem. *The Sixth Day* and *Total Recall* provide a sounding board for the question of personal identity - where do "I" reside? In my brain, my memories, my soul, if there is such a thing? *Minority Report* includes lively discussion about free will, determinism, and compatibilism; *The Hollow Man* asks us "why be moral?"; *Star Wars* gets into the nature of good and evil; *Blade Runner*, death and the meaning of life.

My favorite chapter of all focuses on *Independence Day* and *Aliens*, examining morality in a broader sense, and spending a significant amount of time on the thoughts of one of Rowlands favorite philosophers, Immanuel Kant, as well as utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham. Taking a deeper look at the *Aliens* films, we are asked to put ourselves in the aliens shoes:

The aliens, of course, are portrayed as the baddies. And to be fair, they do have a rather nasty habit of laying their eggs in human bodies, which proves most inconvenient when the hatched creature bursts out of the chest of its human host. Very messy, and rather embarrassing if it should happen at, say, a dinner party. But are the aliens evil or simply misunderstood? They are, after all, another species. So why should they have any moral obligations toward us? After all, we do terrible things to other species, far worse than the grossest alien excesses – just ask an intensively reared pig or chicken, or visit a slaughterhouse some time. At least they just kill us, and while this is a somewhat painful death, at least it happens suddenly and relatively quickly. In the name of cheap food, we inflict lives of untold misery and equally gruesome deaths on hundreds of millions of animals every year.

He goes on to describe the life of a commercial chicken, to great effect, ending with:

Basically, it's no contest. Faced with a choice between a life like that and having an alien burst out of my chest, I would invest in some plastic tablecloths and go with the alien every time...

Now, I was a borderline vegetarian before reading this chapter...I had given up red meat almost ten years past. I suddenly realized how absurd it was to try and draw some kind of artificial boundary between this living creature and that. From that moment on, I was a complete vegetarian. The health part of it is important of course, as I mention in my review of *The China Study*, but I can definitely say it is moral belief that keeps the flesh of another creature far from my lips.

The cool thing is...I wrote to Professor Rowlands a year or so ago to commend him on his book and thank him for it. I got a somewhat lengthy and very cordial reply...always a pleasant surprise in an automated world.

Now, I don't want to give the wrong impression – this isn't a book of pro-vegetarian propaganda. It is an intelligent conversation about philosophy which happens to revolve around that pop culture phenomenon known as the science fiction film. Intellectual snobs may be put off by the premise, but that's too bad. They are missing out on one heck of a smart and entertaining book.

Amy says

I would read a chapter, and then go rent the movie. It was totally fun, and I'd recommend it!

Sarah says

I like the premise, and sentences like these: "If Kevin Bacon attempts to kill his co-workers, is he doing anything wrong according to the social contract theory?"

Overall, though, this wasn't the greatest read. Not all of the film/theory pairings work well. I get the impression that this would make a fun lecture series for an "introduction to philosophy for non-majors" class, where there's a back-and-forth dialogue between the professor and his students.

Shelley says

If I could, I would give this book 2.5 stars. I like the concept of discussing philosophy by using science fiction films as examples. In college, one of my favorite courses was Philosophy as shown in Ingmar Bergman films. I really like science fiction films so I was hoping I would really like this book.

I am probably not the right target audience for this book. It's obviously written for people in their 20's who are new to the concepts of philosophy. I am 60 years old with a Ph.D. in the subject already.

However, even when I was in that age and education bracket, I suspect I would have thought the author was trying a bit too hard to be considered cool. I could easily imagine the author giving a lecture and some students being very engaged and motivated to learn more about philosophy and others just rolling their eyes.

Besides the writing style, my main problem with the book was that the author presented the material as if most of it consisted of facts to learn rather than presenting it as existential questions that each person has to answer for themselves.

I had already seen all but one of the films described in the book. At least it gave me one new film to see...

Joeri Kooimans says

Rowlands succeeds at explaining philosophy in an accessible and very amusing manner. He manages to explain complex philosophical subjects, questions and themes in a way that they can become relatable for people that have not studied philosophy. The use of movies is entertaining and helps imagine what philosophical questions he is addressing.

I do think, however, that not in every chapter the use of movies is equally adequate or fun. Oftentimes it seems more like he is explaining philosophy from his own epistemological and ethical viewpoint, for which he sometimes only briefly refers to movies. It would have been intellectually more honest if he gave some epistemological positions some more credit or attention, instead of the ones he happens to endorse.

However, he does convey his points rather convincingly and the book still gives the reader room to draw his or her own conclusions about the matters he discusses.

Points with which I could myself normatively identify were his views on animal suffering (I'm glad to know Rowlands is vegetarian) and epistemic duties and epistemic responsibility (the duty to believe only true things and actively pursue truth by carefully weighing (empirical) evidence and stringent reasoning). Regarding the latter he ends his book with an appeal and call to us, since beliefs lead to actions: "Try not to be stupid - the world will be a better place for it."

This is the second book I've read with a group of people in prison.

Huseyn says

A very interesting book for those who'd like to enjoy philosophy with some popcorn. If you loved those Sci-Fi movies of the last two decades, you're gonna love this one. Recommended!

Bernie Gourley says

This is one of those books that's designed to make tedious material palatable. Rowlands achieves this by conveying the concepts of erudite philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche, Sartre, Laplace, Kant, Heraclitus, Wittgenstein, Hume, and Heidegger through the lens of popular speculative fiction movies (almost all Sci-fi.)

The book uses thirteen films as case studies to consider ten critical philosophical concepts (over ten chapters.) Virtually all sci-fi fans are likely to have seen most—if not all—of these films. They include: *Frankenstein*, *The Matrix*, the first two *Terminator* films, *Total Recall* (1990), *The Sixth Day*, *Minority Report*, *Hollow Man*, *Independence Day*, *Aliens*, *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. I am not a film fanatic (though I do like Sci-fi) and I'd seen all but two of these movies (i.e. *Hollow Man* and *The Lord of the Rings*.) I can say that the book is understandable without having seen the movies, but it's much more enjoyable when you have seen them. Although, as far as the two movies that I'd missed went, *Hollow Man* was easy because it's a relatively straight-forward invisible man story, and—therefore—the link to that chapter's question "Why Be Moral?" was simple. However, for *The Lord of the Rings* book I had to rely

more on the synopsis the author provides to follow the chain of thought.

The philosophical issues that are addressed include: the meaning of life, what can we really know (if anything), what am I (or you or any other individual), what makes me (you, etc.) different from everyone else, is there free will, why behave morally, how broadly does morality apply (in other words, is it applicable outside humanity), do good and evil exist and (if so) what differentiates them, what does it mean to be mortal, and what's wrong with moral relativism. If you've seen the movies, and give it some thought, you can probably match the movies to the questions easily.

I enjoyed this book. First of all, I will admit that it's easier to follow the concepts and for them to stick with one when one puts them in terms of movies one has seen (in some cases, several times.) Second, the author has a good sense of humor. While Rowlands is a Professor of Philosophy, this book doesn't read in the humorless and dry tone of academic writing. On the contrary, it's meant for a popular audience and it reads for a popular audience. It should be noted that the humor and the exclusive focus on movies (versus literature or films) set this book aside from a number of others that are superficially quite the same. I have another book in storage back home called *Science Fiction and Philosophy* that is by an academic publisher, maintains the scholarly tone, goes into a bit more depth, but covers many of the same ideas (e.g. Brain-in-a-vat, etc.) using similar examples. I didn't finish the more scholarly book, but if you're looking for great depth but not reading ease you might pick it up for comparison.

Rowlands does overplay the "these-movies-are-so-bad-they're-good" card, and when he does he sounds a tad professorial / pretentious. However, the book often reads like it was written by a colorful football coach rather than a Philosophy Professor. And, to be fair, in some cases it's true that the films are delightfully bad. However, these are not B-movies like *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* as one might think from the commentary.

If you're interested in philosophy, but can't get through two pages of Kant without falling asleep, I'd recommend this book.

Bruce says

This is a Sci-Phi book as opposed to Sci-fi. The author uses Sci-fi movies to make philosophical points. While there are many doubts that film producers are trying to make philosophical points when making movies one can read a lot of social commentary into them. Rowlands claims Arnold Schwarzenegger is perhaps the greatest Austrian philosopher of the 20th century. That is kind of a stretch, but the characters he plays can be used to discuss philosophical issues. The mind-body problem is exemplified by Terminator, the problem of personal identity by Total Recall. He uses other movies and actors to discuss these and other issues, e.g. Star Wars for the good versus evil debate. The work is an interesting read that can fit into numerous categories, e.g. philosophy, film commentary; popular culture, et. al. Perhaps bringing modern culture and interpretation to age-old philosophical issues will cause people to begin thinking about rather than reacting to the many sound bites that assault our senses each day.

Ethan says

I'm planning to use this for teaching a college class on philosophy and film. I think it will work pretty well. Rowlands does more than just summarize philosophical ideas (although he does that rather well). He also makes some intriguing points of his own, which makes this a lot more philosophically interesting. I particularly enjoy the chapters on The Matrix, Minority Report, Independence Day/Aliens, and Bladerunner. Oh, Rowlands also has a great sense of humor (or, since it's a very British type of humor, I should say "humour"). He isn't above some occasional use of profanity, which often enhances the humor (although humorless people who are bothered by profanity might not like it, but - as Rowlands might say - fuck them).

João Lamas says

The concept of this book is absolutely brilliant: to serve as an introduction to philosophy by way of popular science-fiction films. It does that and more, it binds old concepts with fresh, clearer examples that are simple to understand by every one. It's a doorway to a new world that is accessible to everyone.

Steve says

Better than I expected! Silly intro to a lot of different philosophical concepts using plots from Sci-Fi movies. Fun to read.
