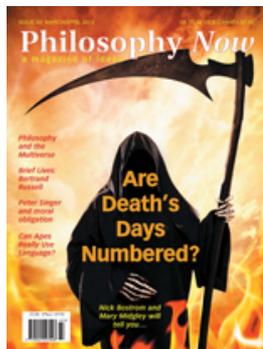


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Doctor Who and Philosophy

Massimo Pigliucci searches time and space to reveal the philosophy of Dr Who.

I vaguely remember hearing about *Doctor Who* when I was growing up in Italy in the 70s, but I never actually watched it. When the BBC restarted the series in 2005 I decided it was time to see what all the fuss was about. I've been hooked ever since; and I occasionally use *Doctor Who* episodes in my introductory classes in philosophy because it's a natural (ie, intelligent and entertaining) entry point for discussions about personal identity (*qua* regeneration), the metaphysics of time travel, and, of course, ethics, ethics, ethics. I was therefore delighted to see this recent addition to the 'Popular Culture and Philosophy' series (go to opencourtbooks.com/categories/pcp.htm).

There is much to enjoy in this collection. Besides the obvious topics mentioned above, we are also treated to Doctor-informed discussions of aesthetics (why, exactly, are the Daleks beautiful?), human nature ('Human beings, you're amazing. Apart from that, you're completely mad!'), the relevance of monadology to the Whoniverse, and even a discussion of the Jesus-like (shouldn't it really be the Socrates-like?) character of the Doctor.

Perhaps my favorite part of the book is Episode 3: 'It's a different morality. Get used to it, or go home!' which comprises a whopping seven chapters on the ethics of our favorite Time Lord. One of the things that is apparently very much open to discussion is what ethical theory best fits the good Doctor's actions and intentions – a problem that is complicated by the Doctor's annoying tendency to slightly alter his personality from one incarnation to the next. For instance, Laura Geuy Akers argues in Chapter we can make sense of what the Doctor does through the lens of the 'ethics of care' approach, on tl grounds that he "responds to individuals, not abstractions." She makes some good points, but I'm convinced. Rather, I find Roman Altshuler's analysis of the Doctor in terms of Aristotelian virtue et Chapter 25 much more compelling. As Altshuler argues, it's about the Doctor's character, and parti some of the virtues he displays time and again, beginning with compassion, which the Doctor coup a high respect for people's abilities to make choices.

It is not difficult to find examples of what Altshuler is trying to show. For instance, in the episode 'Evolution of the Daleks' (2007), the Doctor shows compassion for the last Dalek in existence, whil Christmas Invasion' (2005) he gives the not exactly friendly race of the Sycorax the choice of leav Earth forever in order to avoid destruction. (However, his sense of compassion is thwarted in this Prime Minister Harriet Jones, who ends up wiping the Sycorax out of the sky anyway.) An Aristotle on the show also makes sense of the complex role played by the Doctor's varied companions. As I argued, our best friends hold our character up to us for scrutiny, as if in a mirror, thereby helping pursue a better life. That is precisely what Donna Noble does in 'The Fires of Pompeii' (2008) by convincing the Doctor to save at least some of the citizens of Pompeii; or Rose Tyler does, when s upset with him for not showing mercy to Lady Cassandra in 'The End of the World' (2008). The Doc not a divine being endowed with perfect morals, nor is he some sort of Nietzschean *Übermensch* v actions and intentions sidestep the moral question altogether. He is a good and powerful but flawe who occasionally needs his friends to keep him on the right track.

At over 400 pages long the book isn't exactly light reading, although reading it will pay off handsor anyone interested in science fiction and philosophy. Still, my only complaint about the volume is p that the editors could have done a better job at trimming it down, particularly reducing the numbe largely redundant essays in the first part, on personal identity – a theme that also recurs (again, redundantly) in some of the later essays.

There is so much food for thought in *Doctor Who and Philosophy* that readers are warmly encourag see for themselves just how much bigger this book is on the inside. And remember: "Time travel i visiting Paris. You can't just read the guidebook, you've got to throw yourself in! Eat the food, use wrong verbs, get charged double, and end up kissing complete strangers!... Or is that just me?" ('T Game', 2007).

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