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LOVE, LOSS, AND IDENTITY IN *SOLARIS*

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Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* (2002) was a significant critical success: *Salon* described it as a "visually astonishing and thoroughly admirable new film"; the BBC declared it to be "one of the finest science fiction films since 2001: *A Space Odyssey*"; while the reviewer from *Time Out* claimed, "it's probably the finest, certainly the most stylish, sci-fi film in years . . . this is perhaps the most ambiguous and cerebrally sophisticated Hollywood movie in nearly three decades." All this, despite the fact that the film inevitably competes with two classic works, each of which is often regarded as having the status of a sacred text: Stanislaw Lem's 1961 science fiction novel and Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 cinematic adaptation of that novel. Soderbergh managed, against the odds, to hold his own, with some reviewers even preferring his version over Tarkovsky's or Lem's.¹ Nevertheless, Soderbergh's film was a tough sell to general audiences. It was poorly marketed as a supernatural romance (à la *Ghost*), and viewers looking for the sort of action and effects that dominate contemporary science fiction films left the theater more than a little disappointed. Costing \$47 million but bringing in only \$15 million in domestic box office receipts, *Solaris* may eventually make money on DVD sales, but given that Amazon is currently selling the new DVD for a discounted price of five bucks, I suspect the executives at 20th Century Fox aren't holding their breath.

¹ In his review, Andrew Sarris remarks, "But I prefer Soderbergh's concentration on his two lovers over Tarkovsky's mostly male, mostly patriarchal debating societies. I have been suspicious for a long time of all the accolades bestowed by many of my colleagues on the work of Tarkovsky. Where they see greatness, I see only grandiosity, and a laborious, overlong grandiosity at that" (*The New York Observer*, December 15, 2002). The reviewer from *Time Out* proclaims, "Soderbergh's movie beats its predecessor in virtually every respect. It's not only richer and more rigorous, philosophically, than the Russian's woolly musings, it also has an emotional force barely there in Tarkovsky" (<http://www.timeout.com/film/74916.html>). Writing in *Film Threat* (December 5, 2002), Rick Kisonak discusses both the 2002 film and the original novel and concludes, "It's a gutsy move and I have to say I find Soderbergh's 'Solaris' an eminently more satisfying experience than Lem's."

Part of what has made the film both appealing to some and frustrating to most is its ambiguity. On first watch, it isn't that clear just what is going on, and though the film richly rewards repeat viewings, the patience required for such efforts is significant. Here I want to offer an analysis of *Solaris* that focuses on questions regarding love and personal identity that are raised by the film.² I'll begin with a fairly detailed (but, given the complexity of this film, necessary) recounting of the narrative, and then consider the philosophical puzzles of attachment and identity that the film highlights. Still focusing on issues of identity, I'll argue that the ending of the film is plausibly construed as disturbingly ambivalent. In the final section of the essay, I will consider a different take on the film, one inspired by the work of the philosopher Derek Parfit. A Parfitian philosophical framework allows for a significantly more uplifting vision of the film's end, but (as we'll see) this buoyancy comes at the cost of radically revising our attitudes toward identity and attachment.

THE STORY

The film begins with a shot of rain falling on a window pane,³ followed by Chris Kelvin (George Clooney) sitting pensively on his bed. In voice-over we hear a woman say, "Chris, what is it? I love you so much . . . Don't you love me anymore?" We then see him at work and infer that he is a therapist as we watch him engage with patients. Later, he returns home and prepares a salad, cutting his finger in the process.

Two officials arrive and present him with a video message from an old friend, Gibarian, who pleads that Kelvin needs to come to a space station orbiting the planet Solaris. Gibarian also suggests that, as a therapist, Kelvin is ideally situated to help out the crew as they attempt to deal with some as-yet-unexplained crisis.⁴ We are then given our first glimpse of the bluish-purple gaseous globe that is Solaris as we see Kelvin's shuttle slowly dock with the space station.⁵

² I don't assume that my take on the film is an accurate reflection of all of Soderbergh's intentions. Soderbergh discusses some of his intentions on the DVD commentary track as well as in interviews. One particularly informative interview with Soderbergh and Clooney can be found at <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue293/interview.html>

³ I suspect the appearance of rain here (and later) is a subtle reference to Tarkovsky's less subtle employment of rain in his version of *Solaris*.

⁴ Gibarian actually goes further, saying, "I hope you will come to Solaris, Chris, I think you need to . . . You will see what I mean," suggesting that Gibarian believed Kelvin's encounter with a "visitor" of his own may be somehow therapeutic.

⁵ At this point Solaris is a bluish color. As the film progresses, we see the planet shift in color from blue to purple to red.

Upon arrival at the station, Kelvin notices bloodstains and, eventually, the corpse of Gibarian.⁶ He then comes upon Snow, a crewmember who seems generally out of sorts and surprised to see Kelvin. Snow explains that the blood Kelvin saw belonged to Gutard, who was chased and killed by security forces. Snow also tells Kelvin that he is the one who discovered Gibarian's death (a suicide). Kelvin, shocked, asks for an explanation. Snow responds cryptically, saying, "I could tell you what's happening, but I don't know if that would really tell you *what's happening*."

Kelvin seeks out the only other living member of the crew, Dr. Gordon. Gordon, scared and unfriendly, insists Kelvin not enter her cabin. She refuses to explain the state of the ship, saying only, "Until it starts happening to you, there's really no point in discussing it." Kelvin then encounters a boy who quickly runs away. Returning to Snow, Kelvin is told that the boy is Gibarian's son Michael. Wanting to know more, Kelvin requests a formal interview with both Snow and Gordon, and is mysteriously warned by Snow to lock his door before going to sleep.⁷

In the formal interview Gordon reveals she has been suffering from assorted psychiatric maladies. She doesn't explain the situation on the ship, saying only: "Just that I want it to stop. But I want to stop it. If I can stop it, that means I'm smarter than it is."⁸ Returning to his room, Kelvin listens to a recorded message from Gibarian in which he mocks the space program, saying, "We are proud of ourselves, but when you think about it, our enthusiasm is a sham. We don't want other worlds—we want mirrors."⁹

⁶ Here we get a brief shot of a bloodstain on the ceiling. Only toward the very end of the film will we come to learn the cause of this stain.

⁷ What Snow actually says is, "I find I sleep much better with the door locked." He is presumably trying to encourage Kelvin to lock his door and thus come to realize that his own "visitor" materializes within his quarters (and has not simply been hiding somewhere else on the ship). As we later learn, Snow (being a "visitor" himself) presumably doesn't actually have a need to lock his own door.

⁸ Gordon's interview is followed by an exchange with Snow in which he claims, "I would *kill* to go back to Earth." The irony of this statement won't become apparent until it is eventually revealed that this version of Snow has in fact killed the original Snow.

⁹ The theme of mirroring is pervasive throughout *Solaris*. Gibarian's remarks here are themselves mirrored by the comments of the dinner party guests in one of the flashback scenes. (Though they are discussing God, the ideas in circulation apply equally well to Solaris.) In addition, the suspicion of distortion through projection that comes up in the context of God/Solaris is closely connected to the worry expressed by Gordon, Kelvin, and a Rheya visitor that perhaps Kelvin's memories of Rheya are nothing more than a mirroring and projection of his own needs and wants. (In one heated exchange Gordon says to Kelvin, "She's a mirror that reflects part of your mind. You provide the formula.") The structure of the film also offers many points at which segments "mirror" each other (e.g., the Earth and "Earth" scenes, the first line of dialogue from Rheya and its later repetition, the suicide doubling [flashback and on ship], the doubling of sex on Earth with sex on the ship, etc.).

Kelvin falls asleep, and we then get a flashback sequence (in much warmer amber tones, contrasting sharply with the bluish-gray shots aboard the ship) that begins with a shot of a woman holding a doorknob on the subway. We learn this is Rheya, a woman Kelvin soon meets again at a party and pursues. While he flirts with Rheya at the party, he talks to Gibarian about the planet Solaris and is told that that “the most interesting thing is, well, it seems to be reacting, almost like it knows it is being observed.” (This is said while we are presented with a shot of Rheya seductively walking off, clearly aware that *she* is being observed by Kelvin.) Kelvin continues to flirt with her, attempting to woo her with excerpts from a poem by Dylan Thomas: “And Death Shall Have No Dominion.”

In the next sequence we return to Kelvin sleeping on the ship and see an out-of-focus figure coming up next to him. Eventually this figure is revealed to be Rheya. A montage follows with alternate shots of Kelvin and Rheya apparently making love on the ship and flashback scenes of both coupling on the night they met. The montage ends with a shot of Kelvin sleeping (clothed, thus revealing the ship sex scene we have just watched to be a dream), and a hand gently caresses his neck. Kelvin awakens and is immediately shocked by what he sees: Rheya appears to have materialized from his dreams. Wondering whether he is perhaps still asleep, Kelvin jumps out of bed, slaps himself, and paces anxiously. Eventually he gains some composure and he quizzes this “visitor” about where she thinks she is and *who* she thinks she is. Accurately describing their apartment back on Earth, as well as how they met, she seems to actually be Rheya, but Kelvin knows this is impossible.¹⁰ She then echoes the lines we first heard when the film began, saying, “Chris, I’m so happy to see you. I love you so much. Don’t you love me anymore?” These words, however, are delivered with a slightly uncanny expression on her face and a not-quite-human blink of her eyes.

Suitably distressed, Kelvin says he needs to talk to the crew and attempts to leave his cabin. Rheya₂ immediately rushes to stop him. Shortly afterward we see Kelvin lure her into an escape pod and then, looking both confused and distraught, he ejects the pod into space in an effort to rid himself of this ghostly vision of his lost love.

Afterward he asks Snow, “What was that?” Typically, Snow isn’t forthcoming. When asked where his own “visitor” is, Snow says, “I don’t know. Stopped appearing.” and claims the visitor was his brother. Kelvin reveals to Snow that his visitor was a copy of his dead wife, Rheya. Kelvin asks whether she will come back, and Snow responds, “Do you want her to?” Kelvin doesn’t answer, and his expression suggests that he isn’t sure *what* he wants at this point.

¹⁰ From this point on, I’ll refer to her as Rheya₂, the next visitor as Rheya₃, and so on.

With suitcases piled high against his door to prevent entry, we see Kelvin attempt to fall asleep. This leads to another dream/flashback sequence in which we learn that Rheya was a psychologically troubled writer, that Kelvin repeatedly tried to convince her to marry him, and that she eventually accepted his proposal. We then cut back to Kelvin sleeping on the ship, and once again a hand lovingly caresses his neck. He turns and faces the new Rheya (Rheya₃). There is an immediate cut to a postcoital shot of them both in bed undressed. (We infer a sex scene much like the one previously dreamed has now actually occurred on the ship.) Lounging in bed, she quizzes him about the cut on his finger, saying, "I don't remember that. When did you get that?" This leads to an extended sequence in which she questions him about how she got there and reveals that she doesn't remember much. Later, while Kelvin works at his desk, she gazes at Solaris and apparently has flashbacks/memories of purchasing a pregnancy kit, discovering she is pregnant, and arguing with Kelvin over her moodiness and lack of sociability.¹¹

This flashback sequence culminates in memories of a dinner party in which the guests debate the idea of God. We learn that Kelvin has a coldly rationalistic vision of a purposeless universe while Rheya seems more open to some idea of a higher intelligence. Gibarian, grilling Rheya, accuses her of anthropomorphizing God: "You are ascribing human characteristics to something that isn't human." The theme throughout the conversation is the utter inscrutability of God. We see that Rheya isn't particularly pleased with the vision of Kelvin's (or his friends') worldview that manifests in this discussion. There is a cut back to the space station where Rheya₃ appears to be unhappily absorbing this information. She confronts Kelvin:

RHEYA: Chris, I've got to talk to you.

KELVIN: What's wrong?

RHEYA: I don't understand what's happening. And if I do understand what's happening, I don't think I can handle it.

KELVIN: What do you mean?

RHEYA: I mean . . . I mean . . . I'm not the person I remember.

Or, at least, I'm not sure I am. I mean I do remember things, but I don't remember being there. I don't remember experiencing those things.

¹¹ While many of Rheya₃'s "memories" that are shown to us via flashbacks could plausibly be derived from Kelvin's own memories, these shots of Rheya in the pharmacy and, later, responding to the pregnancy test are harder to explain, as Kelvin is clearly not present. We also later see another scene in which she, very much alone, commits suicide. Perhaps we are supposed to infer that these are based on Kelvin's imaginings of what must have happened, or are instead Rheya₃'s imaginings of those scenes. More likely (though perhaps stylistically inconsistent) we are being granted something closer to an omniscient point of view.

[. . . Kelvin attempts to calm her and encourages her to take sleeping pills . . .]¹²

RHEYA: No, you don't understand. Because I don't think that I can live with this. I don't understand what is happening now. And this, I remember this. I have a memory of it. But I don't remember seeing it, I don't remember being there.¹³

Rheya₃ comes to realize that she is something like a copy of someone else, with memories that are borrowed from somewhere else. Kelvin, already aware that this Rheya is an imitation, has apparently gotten over his initial shock and decided to embrace this illusion: he seems eager to pacify her and prevent her from dwelling on the reality and oddity of the situation.

Kelvin seeks advice from Snow and warns him to never reveal to Rheya₃ that the previous visitor Rheya₂ was cast into space. In an apparent nonsequitur, Snow says, "I wonder if they can get pregnant?"¹⁴ This leads to a flashback/memory that both Kelvin and Rheya₃ seem to experience simultaneously: alternating between shots of both of them (with Rheya₃ staring out the window at Solaris), we see Kelvin and Rheya back on Earth arguing over her pregnancy and a subsequent abortion. In the flashback, Kelvin yells, "You should have told me!" Rheya responds:

Chris, I had to. Obviously I had to. You know that about me. I had no idea you'd react like this. Listen. Listen. What's changed? I didn't even know you wanted one.

In a rage, Kelvin makes it abundantly clear that he *did* want one. He pushes her away, and when she claims, "Please, I won't make it without you!" he responds, "Then you won't make it!" and storms out.

¹² In what may be a reference to *The Matrix* (a film that Soderbergh has said he admires) the sleeping pills Kelvin foists on Rheya are *blue*, while the stimulants Kelvin will take later in an attempt to avoid sleep are *red*. (In *The Matrix* Neo is offered a choice between two pills: a red one that will cause him to "wake up" from an illusory world or a blue one that will put him to sleep.) In the end, however, the red pills in *Solaris* (combined with sleep deprivation) cause Kelvin hallucinations rather than accurate perception.

¹³ Tom Wartenberg has insightfully pointed out (in conversation) that Rheya's description of her condition is in some ways similar to the phenomenology of watching a film. Rheya seems to experience visions and sounds playing in the "theatre of her mind" but lacks the conviction that she was really present when the experiences depicted actually occurred.

¹⁴ I say "apparent" here because, on reflection, the juxtaposition of the mention of the expulsion of Rheya₂ with both Snow's query regarding pregnancy and a flashback of Rheya and Kelvin arguing over her abortion is clearly intentional: the fact that Kelvin "aborts" Rheya₂ against her will is bitterly ironic given that Rheya's suicide was triggered by an argument over her receiving an abortion without Kelvin's knowledge or consent.

Cutting back to the station, we see Snow offer up Kelvin a plan for bringing Gordon and Rheya₃ together to discuss what to do about Solaris. There is then another flashback to Rheya committing suicide while we hear the Dylan Thomas poem being read in voice-over by Kelvin. This is followed by a cut back to the ship and Rheya₃ apparently taking in this information about “her” suicide and contemplating her situation. Somehow knowing that Kelvin discovered the original Rheya’s dead body, Rheya₃ asks him about it. Responding to Rheya₃ as though she was the original, he says he came back for her, and apologizes.

A meeting between all four on ship occurs and they discuss the constitution of the “visitors.” It is suggested that they could be disintegrated through the proper machinery. Kelvin insists he wants to take Rheya₃ back to Earth rather than have her destroyed by the proposed machine. This leads Gordon to quip, “Should we pick up the other one on the way?” Rheya₃ gradually figures out that a previous incarnation of her has been forcibly evicted from the ship, and she reacts accordingly, saying, “Oh my God. Oh my God. *Don’t touch me!*” to Kelvin.¹⁵ This exchange provokes Gordon to angrily warn Kelvin that he is mistaking an artificial projection for a genuine human being.

Later we see Kelvin sleeping, and in an apparent dream Gibarian visits him. Kelvin challenges this visitor, saying, “You’re not Gibarian.” Gibarian responds, “No. Who am I then? A puppet? And you’re not. Or maybe you’re my puppet? But like all puppets you think you are actually humans . . . It’s the puppet’s dream, being human.” Asked about his “son,” Gibarian answers, “That’s not my son. My son is on Earth. And that’s not your wife. They are part of Solaris, remember that.” Kelvin asks, “What does Solaris want from us?” and Gibarian replies, “Why do you think it has to *want* something? This is why you have to leave. If you keep thinking there is a solution, you’ll die here.” Kelvin says he can’t leave and that he will figure out a solution. Gibarian ends his visit with the proclamation: “There are no answers. Only choices.”

Kelvin awakens to discover Rheya₃ missing. She has attempted to kill herself by drinking liquid oxygen. The attempt fails: in a deliberately unsettling scene we see her body “resurrect” and heal itself. Clearly disappointed that she has survived the suicide attempt, Rheya₃ simply says, “Oh no!” and turns away from Kelvin. When he asks, “Why did you do that . . . Rheya?” She responds, “Don’t call me *that*,” and cries.

We then learn that Gordon has indeed constructed a device that will annihilate visitors. Rheya₃ expresses her desire to have the device used on her, leading to an exchange with Kelvin in which she questions her own reality and her

¹⁵ For a brief discussion of the relevance of this line (and the role of touch generally), see note 20.

capacity for free choice. Kelvin makes it clear that he needs her to help him have a chance to “undo that mistake” from his past. In tears, she begs him to let her go. Knowing that she will attempt to have the device used on her once he falls asleep, Kelvin takes a large number of red pills in an attempt to stay awake. This leads to a series of hallucinations: we see shots of him looking panicked and sweaty which alternate with shots of multiple Rheyas, Rheya₃ speaking to Gibarian’s son, a damaged doorway, and other images of Kelvin groping along a hallway. This latter sequence is intercut with a flashback in which Kelvin discovers the original Rheya’s dead body back on Earth. We see that he finds the dead Rheya holding a page ripped from a book containing the Dylan Thomas poem.

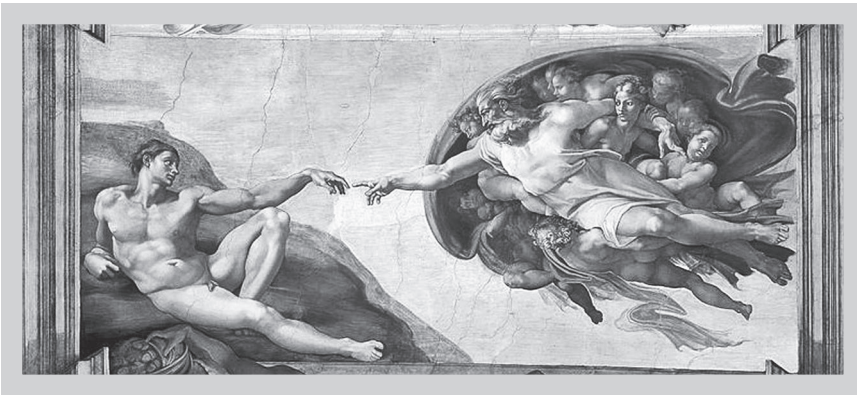
Kelvin wakes up from this delusional sleep and finds another “suicide note” of sorts: Rheya₃ has recorded a video message explaining to Kelvin that she asked Gordon to destroy her. She says:

I realized I’m not her. I’m not Rheya, I know you loved me, though. And I love you. I wish we could just live inside that feeling forever. Maybe there’s a place where we can, but I know it is not on Earth and not on this ship.

Kelvin finds Gordon, argues with her, and in the process both discover blood stains on the ceiling. Investigating, they uncover the frozen corpse of Snow. Realizing that the Snow they have been dealing with must in fact be a “visitor,” they confront him, and he claims he had to kill the original Snow in self-defense. Before they can dwell on how to deal with this twist, Snow₂ reveals to them that Solaris appears to be growing and they don’t have long to escape. We then see Kelvin and Gordon make preparations to leave.

There is a transition to a shot of a rainy window exactly similar to the one we saw in the very first shot of the film. This is followed by other familiar shots of Kelvin on a bed, in the street, on the train, and walking up stairs in the rain to his home. We hear him talking in voice-over—he comments on the oddity of being back and the difficulty to readjusting. We then see him back in his apartment preparing a salad, just as he did at the beginning of the film. (One notable difference is that his refrigerator now has a picture of Rheya on it.¹⁶) He cuts his finger as he did at the beginning of the film, but this time the cut seems to heal itself instantaneously as he runs it under water. Looking dazed and puzzled, he glances at the photo of Rheya.

¹⁶ When Rheya₂ was asked by Kelvin to describe their apartment, she commented, “And there are no paintings on the walls—no pictures anywhere—no pictures on the fridge even, which I always thought was a bit strange.”



The film then cuts back to the station as *Solaris* advances toward it and we see that Kelvin chose *not* to accompany Gordon in the pod.¹⁷ Staying behind, we see him groan and collapse while the station loses power and become enveloped by *Solaris*. Snow₂ is also there and seems to possess a look of rapture as he gazes at *Solaris*'s approach. Gibarian's son Michael₂ walks up to the collapsed Kelvin and, though barely conscious at this point, Kelvin manages to slowly reach out and touch his hand in a gesture that resembles Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*.

There is a cut back to the photo of Rheya on the refrigerator in Kelvin's apartment. While Kelvin stares at the photo, he hears Rheya call to him; he turns, surprised and confused to see her. He walks toward her and asks, "Am I alive . . . or dead?" She responds:

¹⁷ At just this point there is a curious sequence in the station corridor in which we see him repeatedly "doubled" on screen (one image of him fades out while simultaneously another fades in). This seems to hint at the interpretive decision demanded of the viewer here (as to whether we think he stayed on board or returned to Earth with Gordon). (Thanks to George Wilson for pointing out the relevance of this scene.)

We don't have to think like that anymore.

We're together now. Everything we've done is forgiven. Everything.

They kiss and embrace. She is smiling and seems at peace; his face is harder to read: he looks exhausted, teary-eyed, and perhaps happy. The film ends with receding shots of Solaris.

IDENTITY, ATTACHMENT, AND *SOLARIS*

The sci-fi premise of *Solaris* allows Steven Soderbergh to tell a distinctly philosophical love story. The “visitors” present us with a vivid thought experiment and the film effectively prods us to dwell on the possibility it illustrates. If confronted with a near duplicate of someone you have loved and lost, what would your response be? What *should* your response be? The dramatic force of this premise derives from the fact that the tensions raised by such a far-fetched situation reflect tensions that can exist in real life between an attraction to qualities possessed by a person and attraction to the person in a manner that seems to transcend an attraction to qualities. In short, the premise of the film challenges us to reflect on what we *really* attach to when we fall in love: do we really love *the person*, or is it just the cluster of qualities the person happens to manifest and that could (possibly) be found in another? Philosophers have commented on this topic, and one particularly clear statement of the issue was offered by Robert Nozick:

Apparently, love is an interesting instance of another relationship that is historical, in that (like justice) it depends upon what actually occurred. An adult may come to love another because of the other's characteristics; but it is the other person, and not the characteristics, that is loved. The love is not transferable to someone else with the same characteristics, even to one who “scores” higher for these characteristics. And the love endures through changes of the characteristics that gave rise to it. One loves the particular person one actually encountered. Why love is historical, attaching to persons in this way and not to characteristics, is an interesting and puzzling question.¹⁸

As Nozick notes, love's bond, though frequently beginning in an attachment to qualities, doesn't always end there. A deep love for another person often involves an attachment that cannot be reduced without remainder to an attachment to the

¹⁸ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 167–168.

qualities of the beloved. The beloved is, in an important sense, irreplaceable.¹⁹ Of course, even those of us who affirm this sort of bond as a model of love should admit that another form of attachment is both possible and often tempting: an attachment that remains at the level of qualities; qualities that could (in theory at least) be repeated in another. How could the difference between these two sorts of attachment manifest itself? Well, in ordinary life, it might not, as qualities we love are often multiple and complex and we don't usually find them presented to us in more than one instantiation. In certain crude cases we can witness the distinction, however. To take a perhaps too-crude example: a person who is primarily attracted to, say, the blonde hair and biting wit of the beloved may well be willing to accept a substitute, so long as the substitute possesses those desired qualities.

Such a person may well be accused of being "superficial"; however, this charge of superficiality can have multiple sources: some may object that the person simply values *too simple* a collection of qualities, while others may be objecting that it is the attachment to qualities themselves rather than the person exhibiting the qualities that is the objectionable feature of the attachment. It is the latter sort of complaint that is particularly interesting, philosophically, and the nice thing about the cinematic thought experiment we get in *Solaris* is that it allows us to contemplate and reflect on this question regarding the focus of one's attachment. Through the film's presentation of a fictional scenario in which a duplicate (manifesting many, if not all, of the qualities of the original) is created, we can see the protagonist struggle with his own attitudes regarding what sort of bond is appropriate.

At the beginning of the film, Kelvin is a man still in mourning over the suicide of his wife, Rhexya. He seems to feel both deep love for her and deep regret, as he knows her suicide was triggered by his own actions. When he travels to the space station and *Solaris* offers up "visitors" that are strikingly similar to his late wife, his response is complicated. He goes from shock, to rejection, to acceptance, most of the time manifesting what seems to be an appropriate level of confusion given the bizarre situation in which he finds himself. Kelvin's shifting reactions at encountering this unusual scenario are gripping because they track

¹⁹ Elsewhere ("Irreplaceability and Unique Value," *Philosophical Topics* 32: 111–129) I discuss this issue in the context of "The Missyplicity Project," a now defunct research program at the University of Texas to clone a particular dog funded by the wealthy owners of that dog. Finding the plan deeply creepy, I tried to explore what, exactly, is going on when we occasionally find ourselves drawn to attaching to the "type" rather than the "token" of that type. In a more recent article ("Love and History," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 3) I attempt a provisional philosophical defense of the sort of token-directed attachment that many naturally feel is appropriate in love relationships. Here my goals are different: I won't offer a thorough defense that love directed at an individual is metaphysically coherent and ethically preferable to love directed at qualities. What I want to focus on instead are the conflicts that can arise from both sorts of attraction, and the way in which *Solaris* exploits this tension for dramatic effect.

our own ambivalence about such matters. Frankly, most of us don't know just how we would react to such a situation. The thought that accepting and embracing such a "visitor" involves a violation to the original person is natural and pervasive, especially if the acceptance of the copy comes with a failure to acknowledge the distinct identities of the two persons. At the same time, a deep attraction to such a visitor would surely also be entirely natural and perhaps even inescapable.²⁰ As viewers we are, like Kelvin, torn in different directions by this (perhaps thankfully) far-fetched possibility.

Once Kelvin's initial shock and confusion over the arrival of the first visitor (Rheya₂) wears off, we see him decide that he ought *not* to accept his visitor as if she were Rheya. It has become clear to him that a miracle has not occurred: Rheya is not back from the dead. Instead, a copy has been created by an intelligent alien force—a copy drawn from Kelvin's own memories of his lost love. This copy is surely appealing to Kelvin as it is both physically accurate and psychologically very similar to his wife (or at least his memories of his wife), but he can't quite bring himself to ignore his knowledge that it isn't *really* his wife after all. Thus, in a decision that comes quickly but nonetheless does not seem easy for him, he chooses to mislead her and eject her out into space.

It isn't clear if, after the fact, Kelvin regrets this rather rash decision; when Snow asks him if he wants her to return, we just aren't sure what Kelvin is thinking. With the arrival of Rheya₃, however, his immediate willingness to bed down with her suggests at least some degree of acceptance. The degree of acceptance grows with time as he talks to her and sees her exhibit so many of the traits he remembers Rheya possessing. While viewers naturally sympathize with his deep desire to have a second chance and understand the strong psychological pull he feels to embrace Rheya₃ as his dead wife, as the film progresses his attachment comes to seem increasingly problematic. The ethical difficulties here are highlighted in a very direct fashion by Gordon when she at one point tells Kelvin, "She is not human. Try to understand that. [. . .] Your wife is dead. [. . .] She's a copy—a facsimile, and she's seducing you all over again. You're sick!"

²⁰ The inevitability of such an attraction is highlighted in the film through a careful emphasis on the role of touch. Shortly after a scene in which Rheya₃ yells to Kelvin "Don't touch me!" (see note 15) Kelvin says to Gordon, "What about your visitor . . . Does it feel? *Can it touch?* Does it speak?" (emphasis mine). Each of the two copies of Rheya on the ship greets Kelvin by first gently caressing his neck. The third copy of Rheya (on Solaris) also greets him with an embrace and then similarly strokes his neck. Though Soderbergh does not explicitly discuss these repetitions in the DVD commentary, he does at one point say, "I'm imagining that it is very hard to argue with the tactile sensation of her being next to you." Note also that the original Rheya and Kelvin initially come together through holding hands on the elevator, and when the station is being absorbed by Solaris, Kelvin's last act is to grasp the hand of Michael₂ (Gibarian's son).

One explanation for the diagnosis that Kelvin is “sick” is that he seems, as time goes on, to have decided to take the easy way out and embrace a comforting illusion rather than expend the effort required to come to terms with the (moral and metaphysical) reality of his situation. His motives for yielding to this denial of the facts are no doubt complicated but appear increasingly ethically suspect: while he is surely motivated by a sincere longing and love for his late wife, he seems equally motivated by a misguided and self-centered attempt to use Rheya₃ as a vehicle to atone for his past sins to Rheya. Trying to *undo* the past by *recreating* the past with a copy, he appears more and more unhinged, both psychologically and morally, as the story unfolds.

That Gordon is on to something in her diagnosis of Kelvin’s state is emphasized by his interaction with Rheya₃ as *she* reflects on and becomes increasingly aware of her dubious ontological status. Recognizing that she is not simply a copy of another person, but a copy of Kelvin’s (possibly distorted) *memories* of another person, she comes to question her potential for free choice and any sort of authentic existence:

RHEYA₃: Don’t you see I came from your memory of her. That’s the problem. I’m not a whole person. In your memory you get to control everything. So, even if you remember something wrong, I am predetermined to carry it out. I’m suicidal because that’s how you remember me.²¹

Kelvin, at this point disturbingly self-absorbed, responds:

I don’t believe that we’re predetermined to relive our past. I think we can choose to do it differently [...] This is my chance to undo that mistake . . . and I need you to help me.

Rheya₃, in tears, exclaims, “But am I really Rheya?” and Kelvin responds, as if in a daze, “I don’t know anymore. All I see is you. . . . All I see is you.”²²

Later Rheya₃ suggests that in order for Kelvin and her to continue on, they “would have to have some sort of arrangement, some kind of unspoken understanding that I’m not really a human being.” Saying only, “No, Rheya,” he reaches

²¹ *Solaris* has interesting thematic overlap with the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In both we are presented with tales of lost love and second chances, and in both the female of the couple is presented to the viewer almost entirely as a projection based on the male character’s memories of her. *Solaris* also seems to implicitly reference the classic film about love, loss, and projection: Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*.

²² To my mind this is an excellent example of someone failing (rather spectacularly!) to follow Iris Murdoch’s injunction to “*really* look”—to strive to perceive the reality of a situation accurately. Murdoch eloquently argued that such perception is demanded by both love and justice. For more on Murdoch’s conception of morality and love, see the contribution from Susan Wolf in this collection.

for the red pills that will keep him awake and thus enable him to ensure she doesn't attempt suicide. Rheya₃ comes to reject this possibility of them staying together, saying, "This? What kind of life is this? Trapped here? It's not a life, I don't know what to call it." Kelvin, at his most disturbing, replies, "It is what we have. It is enough for me." By now Gordon's earlier claim that Kelvin was "sick" seems an understatement. He naturally craves his lost love, and we can appreciate why he would desire some sort of redemption from her, but of course Rheya₃ is not actually in a position to forgive Kelvin for his earlier abandonment of Rheya, and while at some level he clearly knows this, he doesn't seem to care—an imitation of forgiveness, from an imitation of Rheya, has come to seem acceptable to him. Thus my earlier charge of self-absorption: if he was really caring about Rheya at this point, he'd be sensitive enough to notice that *she's not there*. If he really cared about the visitor, he'd be sensitive enough to notice that *she isn't Rheya* (and is an autonomous individual). Since he isn't recognizing the distinct identity of either, but instead blurring them, he is simultaneously disrespecting both. This willingness to indulge in fantasy and ignore Rheya₃'s pleas is truly striking, and it is a testament to George Clooney's sympathetic portrayal of Kelvin that we don't find him loathsome at this point.²³

That Kelvin is disregarding Rheya₃'s wishes, her autonomy, and her individuality is patently clear. It is possible that one might try to excuse his behavior by pointing out that Rheya₃ isn't, after all, a human being and thus his violation here is not as morally problematic as a failure to respect the needs and desires of a real person.²⁴ While I think this defense is misguided, rather than respond to it in detail with an argument in favor of Rheya₃'s "humanity," I want to instead focus again on the way in which Kelvin is *also* disregarding the memory of a very real person, his dead wife Rheya. What would the original Rheya have thought about Kelvin's willingness to ignore the distinction between her and the visitors that appear to him? It seems likely that she would have been disturbed, and perhaps even disgusted, by his attempt to compensate for his failure to her

²³ Another reason why many viewers continue to interpret Kelvin sympathetically (and one reason why, I think, this story works better on film than on the page) is that the viewers are, just like Kelvin, shown a woman who looks *exactly* like the original. "Seeing is believing," as they say, and I think part of the pull to accept Rheya₃ as Rheya comes from our instinctual trust in what we are shown on the screen. Reflecting on the situation after the fact, it is easier to recognize that Rheya₃ is indeed a fully distinct individual. (This same point will apply later to our initial willingness to trust that the Kelvin we see at the end is the original Kelvin.)

²⁴ Another rather different sort of defense might focus on the wrongness of suicide and interpret Kelvin's actions here as primarily motivated by a concern that Rheya₃ not commit this wrong act. While I don't want to deny that Kelvin *may* have this motivation, it seems quite clear at this point in the film that his *primary* motivations concern his desire to use Rheya₃ in order to fulfill a misguided fantasy of moral redemption and lost love regained.

through building a new life with a copy of her. (Think how you would feel about someone *you* love behaving in a similar matter toward a “copy” of you, i.e., refusing to recognize that you and the copy are *distinct* individuals. You might come to *forgive* the person for this failure to acknowledge your individual identity, but such forgiveness in itself necessarily involves an acknowledgment of a significant wrong on his or her part.) Kelvin’s descent into denial and fantasy involves not just mental illness but a morally troubling attitude of disregard toward the memory of the woman he so urgently claims to love.

THE ENDING

Perhaps luckily for her, Rheya₃ does manage to destroy herself (with Gordon’s help) and Kelvin is left alone, forced to choose whether to try and return to Earth or stay on the ship as it is absorbed (and presumably destroyed) by the ever-growing Solaris. The structure of the film at this point deliberately misleads the viewer (at least on first viewing): we are led to infer initially that Kelvin chooses to return to Earth with Gordon, and we are shown several shots of him living out his daily life that very closely echo the shots that began the film. Only later are we shown footage that reveals that he in fact remained behind on the ship. What exactly occurs from that point on remains opaque, even after the credits roll. What is clear enough is that Kelvin (or someone just like him) is reunited with Rheya (or someone just like her) in an environment that looks just like Earth. However, the structure of the film and the final shots of the receding Solaris make it clear that this “Earth” is, in fact, Solaris.

One tempting interpretation of the ending of the film is to see it as offering a heartwarming tale of resurrection and redemption in an afterlife created by a sympathetic God-like intelligence.²⁵ (The producer James Cameron, predictably, pushes just such a cheery interpretation in the DVD commentary.)²⁶ I think it is beyond doubt that we are supposed to initially consider such an outcome, and surely part of the appeal of the ending for many viewers is this possibility. Nevertheless, upon reflection, I think the most plausible interpretation of

²⁵ The inclusion of the Dylan Thomas poem and the focus on the line: “And death shall have no dominion” (derived from Romans 6:9) can obviously be taken to support a construal of the film’s ending as offering an optimistic vision of resurrection and reunion. An extended consideration of the poem is beyond the scope of this essay, but I take it that the poem, like the film, lends itself to both a superficially happy interpretation and, on reflection, a darker reading. Notably both Kelvin and Rheya agree that, in the end, it is “not a very happy poem.”

²⁶ I say “predictably” here because there has traditionally been a strong commercial incentive for films to have “happy endings” and presumably Cameron, as producer, is in part motivated by such incentives. For a dismissive discussion of the film as offering a happy ending, see Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie, “Ethical Exploration,” *Sight and Sound* 13, no. 2 (February 2003): 17–18.

the final sequences leaves matters decidedly more nuanced and unsettled. Here I'll try to make the case that the most reasonable reading of the film is one in which we take seriously the possibility that the Kelvin we see in the last sequences of the film is not, in fact, the original Kelvin but some new creature created by Solaris and probably based (like the other "visitors") on memories. If this is right, then a straightforward reading of the ending as one involving everlasting life and reunion with a lost love is far too simplistic.

What are the reasons for thinking we should conclude that the Kelvin we see at the end of the film is best construed as Kelvin₂ rather than a magically enhanced and now immortal Kelvin? First off, the absorption of the space station by Solaris presumably destroys the necessary life-support mechanisms on the ship and would cause any remaining humans to die. We see Kelvin in great pain and apparently close to death when he encounters Michael₂ (the copy of Gibarian's son). Though we don't clearly see Kelvin die, it is plausible to assume he does. That his final pose resembles Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam* suggests that what we will encounter next will indeed be some kind of significantly *new* creation.

Since we eventually learn that Kelvin did not go back to Earth with Gordon, we can safely conclude that the "Earth" we see Kelvin "return" to is actually a recreation of Earth on Solaris. The Rheyas who appear is also, presumably, a recreation. It makes sense, then, that Kelvin is also a recreation at this point. His body's ability to instantly heal the cut on his finger certainly suggests this idea. (We already know that the visitors can heal themselves, and we know that the creation of a brand new Kelvin is entirely within Solaris's powers, for we have learned that the original Snow was killed by a Solaris-created copy of himself.)

Consider also that Kelvin's monologue (delivered as a voice-over) about returning to Earth takes on a different and perhaps more comprehensible tone if we imagine it being uttered by a duplicate Kelvin trying to make sense of his new existence and situation²⁷:

²⁷ The shots that appear while this monologue is being delivered mirror shots we see at the beginning of the film, but there are subtle yet important differences. In all these later shots we get a distinct impression of distance that is not present in the early versions. With the camera being further away, sometimes at a different height, and usually in motion, the suggestion seems to be that the camera now represents the point of view of a removed intelligence monitoring Kelvin. In contrast, the earlier scenes are either shot in such a way as to align us with Kelvin or are shot in a traditional "transparent" style. To my mind, the distancing present in these later sequences further suggests the idea that what we are looking at in these scenes may not be Kelvin but instead yet another creation of Solaris. The style of these shots is a subtle indicator that perhaps we, as viewers, should also be distancing ourselves from this man. It helps push us to not be complacent with a superficial interpretation of the film that would suggest an all-too-happy ending to this nuanced and melancholy story.

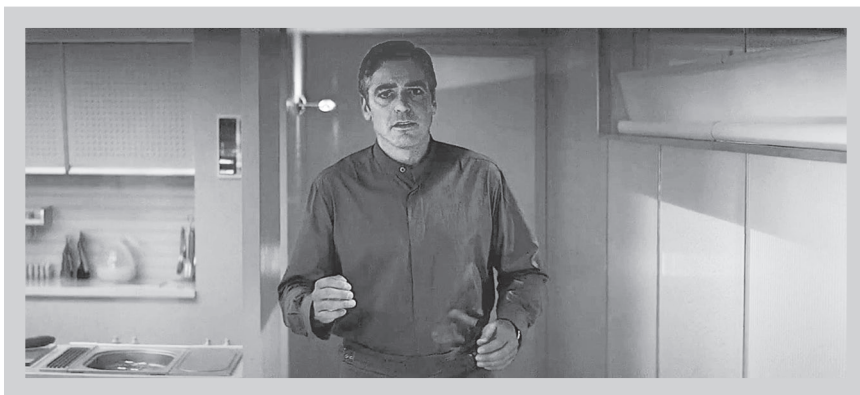
Earth. Even the word sounded strange to me now. Unfamiliar. How long had I been gone? How long had I been back? Did it matter? I tried to find the rhythm of the world where I used to live . . . I followed the current. I was silent, attentive, I made a conscious effort to smile, nod, stand, and perform the million of gestures that constitute life on earth. I studied these gestures until they became reflexes again, but I was haunted by the idea that I remembered her wrong. That somehow I was wrong about everything . . .

The need to study and practice basic gestures is not entirely surprising if in fact he is some sort of a recreation or duplication of the original Kelvin. (Recall the somewhat odd behavior of Snow₂ as he struggles throughout the film to accurately portray the original Snow.) Kelvin's worry that he "was wrong about everything" may well include a worry about the nature of his *own* existence at this point.

In addition, it is worth remembering the dream visitation of Gibarian and his cryptic comments to Kelvin about puppets ("Who am I then? A puppet? And you're not. Or maybe you're my puppet? But like all puppets you think you are actually humans . . . It's the puppet's dream, being human."). With this speech in mind, note the mildly odd and artificial stance of Kelvin once he notices Rheyra and walks over to her in the final sequence of the film. The somewhat unnatural posture of his arms in this scene brings to mind the image of a marionette: a puppet held up by strings and manipulated by someone above. Of course, if he is in fact a creation of Solaris at this point, a puppet metaphor is not far off.

Finally, while it may be tempting to interpret the film as telling an uplifting spiritual tale of resurrection in an afterlife, it is important to keep in mind that throughout the film various characters emphasize that Solaris is an entirely *alien*





sort of intelligence, and attributing benevolent motives to it is little more than a leap of faith given that it has not communicated any such intentions to those members of humanity it has thus far interacted with. *Perhaps* it seeks to give Kelvin everlasting life, and *perhaps* it has the ability to do this, but it is just as possible that it is merely experimenting with his memory blueprint for its own, mysterious aims.²⁸ After all, Solaris did not seem to show benevolence in confronting Snow with a copy of himself, or Gibarian with a copy of his son (while his son is still alive back on Earth!), and though we never find out who Gordon's visitor was, it is safe to assume (given her response) that it was not a welcome guest. To suggest that Solaris nevertheless has created an afterlife for Kelvin and Rheya *as an act of love* is to make the alien planet into a disturbingly fickle God. It is much more plausible, given all that we are shown, to conclude that the ending represents something significantly less comforting than the traditional conception of Heaven.

PARFIT AND THE "UNIMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY"

I've suggested that we should resist the temptation to see *Solaris* as presenting an unambiguously happy ending and instead consider that the ending of this film is actually fairly disturbing once we reflect on the possibility that the "reunion" we see is, in fact, the coming together of two *newly created* creatures who possess merely *apparent* memories derived from the genuine memories of a real human who has perished. However, there is yet another rather different way to make sense of the ending, given the interpretation of the film I've offered

²⁸ Given that toward the end of the film Kelvin seems to have decided to accept an illusion and stop recognizing the distinct reality of Rheya, it is ironic that at the very end of the film he too appears to be a duplicate. It is as if Solaris, far from feeling benevolent, has decided to deliver just deserts: if a copy is good enough *for Kelvin*, then why shouldn't a copy *of Kelvin* be good enough as well?

here. One *could* challenge the presupposition that we can coherently mark off the identities of these various entities—one could question the very reality of the self. If the boundaries of the self are in some sense illusory, then perhaps the ending of the film represents as genuine a reunion as is *ever* possible, and perhaps a cheerier response to the ending is justified. I want to conclude by sketching out this rather radical possibility through borrowing some ideas from philosopher Derek Parfit.

In discussing questions of personal identity and attachment, Parfit has recognized that many people would be reluctant to allow the replacement of a loved one with a duplicate—he admits that we often attach to persons in a way that can't be understood solely through reference to their qualities. Regardless of whether we naturally tend to attach to persons in this manner, he argues that we are nonetheless better off if we come to love in a more reasonable way. Considering the fictional case of a woman named Mary Smith who creates a duplicate of herself using a replicating device, he says:

I fall in love with Mary Smith. How should I react after she has first used the Replicator? I claim both that I would and that I *ought* to love her Replica. This is not the “ought” of morality. On the best conception of the best kind of love, I ought to love this individual. She is fully psychologically continuous with the Mary Smith I loved, and she has an exactly similar body. If I do not love Mary Smith's Replica, this could only be for one of several bad reasons.[...] The remaining explanation is that my love has ceased for no reason. No reason is a bad reason. Love can cease like this, but only an inferior kind of love.²⁹

The duplicate or replicated Mary has everything about Mary that one could reasonably love: she has the same personality, an exactly similar body, and even qualitatively identical memories (or “quasi-memories,” as Parfit calls them). What's not to like, or in this case, love?

Parfit understands that few will be inclined to accept this revision, but he thinks this is because most of us hold, either explicitly or implicitly, confused

²⁹ Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 295–296. Note that this passage comes in the context of Parfit defending the more limited point that loving a “series-person” is reasonable. In the end, however, his position commits him to denying the importance of the identity of a loved one even *in our world* (and not just a world where series-persons are common), and thus accepting replaceability as rationally appropriate. This is because Parfit argues (in *Reasons and Persons*) not just that identity does not matter, but that what does matter are psychological relations with *any* cause, and a duplicate possesses these psychological relations (albeit through an abnormal cause) (287). (I also discuss this passage from Parfit in “Love and History,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 3.)

metaphysical beliefs. Most of us think that the identity of a person is some sort of “deep further fact” over and above the psychological and physical relations that make up a person.³⁰ Parfit provides several intriguing thought experiments that are supposed to bolster his claim that identity cannot rationally have the importance we normally grant it. Perhaps his most effective argument relies on an example (derived from David Wiggins) in which we imagine one person splitting into two. Here is a brief reconstruction of that “fission” thought experiment:

1. It is commonly accepted that a person can survive a hemispherectomy. In other words, people have survived operations in which an entire hemisphere of one’s brain is removed. While the surviving person may be changed in very significant ways, we don’t consider the person to be numerically distinct from the original person who chose to undergo the procedure.³¹ (Your thought going into such a procedure is not, presumably, that you will be destroyed by the operation and replaced by another less functional person. Rather, you would anticipate surviving as a less functional version of oneself.)
2. It is also commonly accepted that if one’s brain could be transplanted into a different body, the person would go where the brain goes. In other words, our brains are essential to our identity in a manner in which the rest of our body is not. (Thus the plausibility of “brain in a vat” scenarios we see and accept in so much science fiction.)
3. Given 1 and 2, we can assume that if it were possible to, say, destroy one hemisphere of a person’s brain and transplant the remaining hemisphere into a new (but similar) body, the resulting person (in the new body) would be numerically identical to the original person that existed prior to this procedure. In other words, the survival of half of your brain (put into a new but functional body) is enough to constitute *your* survival. (It does not follow that this is a *happy* state of affairs—merely that it is a state of affairs in which you have not ceased to exist.)
4. Consider now a variation on the scenario described in 3: Rather than destroy one hemisphere, imagine that we take your brain and transplant each

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

³¹ *Numerical* identity is being contrasted here with *qualitative* identity. While the person who exists after the operation will not be qualitatively identical to the previous person, as many of his or her qualities will have changed, he will still be numerically identical in the sense that he is one and the same person who chose to undergo the procedure. Philosophers discussing personal identity are usually focusing on numerical (rather than qualitative) identity. It is this sense of identity that is being analyzed by Parfit.

hemisphere into two new (but similar) bodies. In the case of this “fission,” which resulting person is you? There seem to be only three possibilities: (A) You do not survive. (B) You survive as one of two people. (C) You survive as both.

5. None of these possibilities is satisfactory. Consider each in turn: (A) How could a double success be a failure? (B) Which one? Choosing either as the survivor seems arbitrary. (C) This seems nonsensical. Survival involves identity, and I cannot be identical (numerically) with more than one thing.
6. Though we know all the relevant information, we seem unable to come up with a determinate answer to the question of your identity in such a case.

As the fission example shows, there are puzzles involving personal identity that raise questions to which we have no idea how to answer. Parfit thinks that such cases cannot be easily answered because they have no clearly correct answer. Our criteria for identity do not cover every conceivable case—there are situations in which they are incomplete and come apart. We readily accept that this can happen for concepts such as “table” or “nation”—the indeterminacy of our criteria for the identity of such things doesn’t disturb us. Cases involving personal identity are importantly different, however. We often feel they *must* have an answer. How could there not be a “yes” or “no” answer to the question of whether the person possessing my body tomorrow will be me? We tend to think that no matter what occurs between now and then, the resulting person *either* must be me or must not be me. In other words, we think there must be *some* determinate answer, even if we don’t currently know what it is. Parfit argues that we should give up this belief, and further, that we should “give up the language of identity.”³² (After all, the fission case shows that we can have a situation in which, at the end, what *does* matter is present, but numerical identity is absent.) According to Parfit, what actually matters in survival comes in relations of degree (i.e., physical and/or psychological continuity and connectedness). Personal identity in itself (which is “all or nothing”) doesn’t matter. A person is like a nation—what matters are the parts.

It is natural to believe that there is some further fact about our identity that decides all possible cases (thus we posit the existence of a mysterious soul or mental substance), and it is also natural to believe this must be a rather deep fact about us. Parfit denies that there is any such fact. Surprisingly, he does not see this as a depressing conclusion:

³² Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity,” in *Personal Identity*, ed. John Perry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 203.

Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating and consoling. When I believed my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. (281)

Parfit argues that only the existence of some deep further fact would give me a reason to be specially concerned about *my* future. In the absence of this fact, mere personal (numerical) identity gives me no such reason. To put it bluntly, self-interest becomes absurd without a self.³³ Further, an attachment to the identity of another individual (such as a friend or lover) is also, on this view, similarly problematic.³⁴

At the end of *Solaris* we see someone who looks like Kelvin asking someone who looks like Rheya, “Am I alive or am I dead?” He may well just be wondering if he’s alive back on Earth or instead in something like Heaven. Given the subtleties of the film, and the peculiarities of the situation he finds himself in, however, I think it is plausible to take him to be asking (or at least groping toward) a more disturbing question: is he the *original* Kelvin (back on Earth) or is he instead a *copy* of Kelvin (in some simulated world)? (Certainly this is a question that we are inclined to ask about him at this point.) We have now seen, however, that a Parfitian need not accept *this* sort of question as legitimate. There may be no justifiable distinction to draw between being the “original” Kelvin and being a “copy,” for such a distinction relies on a notion of identity that, according to Parfit, lacks the importance we normally grant it. Similarly, Parfit’s conclusions suggest that our earlier concerns over whether Kelvin was recognizing the distinct identities of the Rheya visitors may also have been misguided. If identity doesn’t matter, then the drawing of lines marking off the individual identities of the various Rheyas is

³³ Admittedly, this phrasing puts things more strongly than Parfit does. He prefers to characterize his position as a version of “constitutive reductionism” rather than “eliminative reductionism.” Parfit doesn’t deny that selves (in some sense) exist, but he does deny that this existence has the importance we ordinarily grant it. Cf. “Is Personal Identity What Matters?” (2007).

³⁴ Effective criticisms of Parfit’s approach toward identity can be found in the writings of Mark Johnston. See in particular “Human Beings,” *The Journal of Philosophy* (1987) and “Reasons and Reductionism” in *Reading Parfit*, ed. by Jonathan Dancy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997). While I think Johnston’s arguments are successful, it should be noted that many contemporary philosophers have followed Parfit in rejecting the idea that identity can have importance in itself. Among those who agree (more or less) with Parfit on this issue are Sidney Shoemaker, John Perry, Carol Rovane, Jennifer Whiting, and Anthony Quinton. Parfit has also claimed that the Buddha held something close to his view.

wrongheaded. The question, “Is Rheya₃ identical to Rheya₁?” may be as pointless and arbitrary as asking the question, “Do I still have one and the same audio system?” after I have chosen to replace some but not all of my audio components.³⁵ When we encounter situations that stretch the limits of the criteria we have for the use of a concept, we can end up with genuine indeterminacy. In cases where there is no determinate answer to be uncovered, all we can do is *choose* to adopt or create an answer by convention. We find ourselves in a position where we might say, echoing Gibarian, “There are no answers. Only choices.”

If we accept both the occasional indeterminacy and the ultimate unimportance of personal identity, the ending of *Solaris* takes on a very different flavor. Kelvin’s question about his own identity is given what can now be recognized as a thoroughly Parfitian response by Rheya: to give up the language of identity is indeed to recognize that “We don’t have to think like that anymore.”³⁶ Here are Parfit’s own comments on how his approach can allow him to deny that death has dominion:

After a certain time, none of the thoughts and experiences that occur will be directly causally related to this brain, or be connected in certain ways to these present experiences. That is all this fact involves. And, in that redescription, my death seems to disappear.³⁷

Following Parfit, Kelvin can free himself from the pseudo-problem of his identity and instead embrace both Rheya and the situation they now find themselves in. Free from ontological concerns, they are finally able to realize Rheya’s earlier ambition to “just live inside that feeling [of love] forever.”

What of Rheya’s final proclamation to Kelvin regarding forgiveness? Interestingly, that too can be given a Parfitian reading. Parfit points out that his project of attacking the traditional notion of the self provides compelling grounds for suspecting that the equally traditional notions of desert and punishment should also be rejected.³⁸ If the locus of responsible agency (i.e., the self) does not have the robust reality we naturally take it to have, then perhaps the whole

³⁵ This example is offered by Parfit in “The Unimportance of Identity” in *Personal Identity*, eds. Raymond Martin and John Barresi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 301.

³⁶ In keeping with the Parfitian spirit of this section, from this point on I drop the use of subscripts to identify the various versions of Kelvin and Rheya.

³⁷ Derek Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity” in *Personal Identity*, eds. Raymond Martin and John Barresi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 317.

³⁸ Derek Parfit, “Comments,” *Ethics* 96 (1986): 832–872.

idea of moral responsibility ought to be jettisoned. If this is right, then there is indeed a *sense* in which, as Rheya says, “everything we’ve done is forgiven.”³⁹

CONCLUSION

I’ve been interested in two tensions elicited by *Solaris*. One tension arises once we start to think about how best to make sense of the plot. The film, particularly the ending, is ambiguous. Given that a primary theme of the film is the unknowability of the alien intelligence that is Solaris, I think this ambiguity is appropriate—an ending in which we knew exactly what was going on would (arguably) not resonate as well with the idea of Solaris as deeply inscrutable and alien. By the end of the film, though things are ambiguous, they are not entirely obscure, and what I have tried to show is that the film gains some of its force from the pull it creates between rival interpretations.

There is the pull to interpret the film as one with a conventional and happy Hollywood ending, and a superficial reading of the ending allows us to see Kelvin as gaining entrance to something like Heaven while being reunited with his lost love. There is also the pull to interpret the film as offering something darker and significantly less conventional. Keeping in mind that the director started out as an “indie” auteur and the source material is both melancholy and complex, we can look for more than standard Hollywood fare here, and if we look closely we will indeed see a film in which the ending is quite nuanced and potentially disturbing.

I don’t think this tension is due simply to an unhappy compromise arising from the conflicts between an auteur and a major studio (i.e., between art and commerce). As I mentioned before, I think the film is quite deliberately ambiguous. More specifically, I think there is a way in which the narration is, to use George Wilson’s phrase, “rhetorically unreliable.” Consider Wilson’s comments on *You Only Live Once*:

The spectator is led to draw conclusions from parts and aspects of what he sees even though the screen equally displays information that, taken together with the general knowledge of the probabilities of the actual world, ought to serve to undercut some of the prompted inferences.⁴⁰

³⁹ Though admittedly the sense here is not the *standard* one (which presupposes the existence of genuine moral responsibility). Instead, here the idea would be that they have discovered there is nothing to forgive since no culpable wrongdoing is, in fact, possible. (Thanks to David Cockburn for pushing me to emphasize this point.)

⁴⁰ Wilson, George M. *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 42.

Supplement his talk here of “general knowledge of the probabilities of the actual world” with something like our general knowledge of criteria for identity, and you end up with a description that I think fits this film pretty well.

Focusing on the issues of identity and attachment, as I have tried to do, we can see that our initial temptation to grant benevolent motives to both Kelvin and Solaris needs to be tempered by an appreciation of the actual facts presented to us: Kelvin isn’t asking his wife for forgiveness; he’s using a copy of his wife to try and get past his guilt. Solaris isn’t a loving, God-like force; it is instead an inscrutable alien being whose motives remain mysterious and seem to be, at best, amoral.

This tension regarding how to best interpret the narrative is related to and informed by a distinct tension elicited by the film concerning the focus of attachment when we love. The film naturally evokes contemplation on the complexities of love; in particular it encourages us to consider the nature of love’s bond. The far-fetched scenario presented to us resonates with very ordinary tensions we can feel when we ourselves love. I have argued that with the character of Kelvin we see a good person go bad (or at least go ill) in deciding to ignore important moral distinctions between individuals in order to satisfy a very strong emotional thirst. The interpretation of the film I’ve offered is also compatible with rather different philosophical approaches to questions of attachment and identity, however, and I’ve tried to show how, in particular, a Parfitian vision fits surprisingly well with the final moments of the film. I’m not a Parfitian, so I’m inclined to continue to see the film’s resolution as less than heart-warming. I think a Parfitian perspective is worthy of consideration, however, and the fact that film can be rewardingly construed along such lines is an additional reason why this complex, ambitious, and ambiguous film merits our attention.

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