

Sustainability in Metempsychosis

— Groundhog Day Paper

What would people do if they have infinite amount of time, chances, and power in their life? Each individual may have his or her own unique answer, which depends on his or her ultimate pursuits in their life. *Groundhog Day*¹ is a film telling a story that a TV man Phil Connors “is doomed to repeat the same day over and over until he reaches a sort of ethical ideal —until his conduct embodies a ‘good life’.”² Throughout Phil’s experience in his metempsychosis, he separately lives different lives with different purpose and motivations, of which roots could be found in hedonism, utilitarianism, and stoicism among different schools of moral philosophy. The film ends with a happy ending that enables Phil to move on to his second day with his skills, virtues, and true love, which reveals the director’s attitude that virtue is the paramount good among a variety of ideologies. Depending on the descriptions of different good lives in the film, a comparison among different ‘good life’ ideologies could reveal a point in *Groundhog Day*: While each ideology has its own advantages, a virtuous and stoic life is the most sustainable solution in front of little influence from event’s consequences and overall focus on personal experience.

Since the key in living a good life with infinite time is to persistently enrich the significance(or good) of individual’s life, we can regard **sustainability** as one of the most important criterion to evaluate the ultimate experience, while such good of individual’s life could come from pleasure, utility, virtue, and so on according to different schools of moral thoughts.

In *Groundhog Day*, the setting of the story aims to abstract the moral dilemma from real life. Compared with ordinary people in reality, Phil’s *Groundhog Day* is different from reality in three perspectives: 1. There is no consequence in his actions, since all the things he does will be gone in the ‘next day’; 2. He has infinite time, because death

¹ *Groundhog Day*. Directed by Harold Ramis. United State: Columbia Picture, 1993.

² Greer, *A Picture of the Good Life: Groundhog Day*, 2018, Page 1.

cannot bring him to the end; 3. He can be omniscient, since he can use his infinite time to inquire everything he wants to know without causing any effects. Such setting is effective in moral scenario, because it liberates human from irrelevant weighing of actions' consequence instead of actions themselves, and the immortality in metempsychosis leads people to completely focus on actions' effects instead of its costs. By building such exceptional life experience setting, this story also resonates with the real life by emphasizing on their similarities which this film wants to reflect in the real life. The similarities includes: 1. Nothingness of actions; 2. Wandering in different ideologies; 3. Powerlessness in front of nature and rules. In general, this setting leads people to seek the answer to one question: what is the ultimate good while such good should be good in itself?

This question was raised throughout the film. During his never-ending rebornings, Phil successively lives his life with different purpose. The first stage in his metempsychosis was accord with hedonism. With his omniscience and actions without consequences, Phil eats whatever he wants, sleeps with different girls, and acts without any rules. Such life fulfills his desires and enriches him with tremendous pleasure, but when everything becomes routine and is accord with his expectation, he realized the meaninglessness in his desires. As Seneca said in *On Tranquility of Mind*, “Moreover, we ought not to allow our desires to wander far afield, but we must make them confine themselves to our immediate neighbourhood, since they will not endure to be altogether locked up.”³[Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*] This criticism from stoic idea raises one major problem of hedonism that this film also manifests: there is no end in pursuing desires, and such endless desire-fulfilling is vain and contrary to seeking freedom. Ultimately, it makes human the slave of their desires with no difference from animals. Thus, in terms of sustainability, hedonism is not a reliable creed, because theoretically the basis it depends on (desire or expectation) is varying along the time, and such unlimited self-fulfilling can never last.

The second stage of Phil's metempsychosis, after his attempts to kill himself, is similar to utilitarianism, as he seeks to gain his utility by trying to sleep with Rita in the most efficient way. He used all kinds of tricks to capture Rita's affection, all

³ Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*, Page 6

aiming to achieve the final result(Rita’s body and love) instead of the process itself(the experience with Rita). However, such attempts fail, because Rita represents a humanity that process and motivation of actions do matter more than the consequence. As Kant indicates:

“It is concerned not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form, and with the principle from which it follows. And what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may.”⁴[Sandel Michael, Justice: What’s the Right Things to Do]

Only a categorical imperative, Kant argues, can qualify as an imperative of morality. Thus, when Rita rejects Phil, it represents a rejection of consequentialism. In terms of sustainability, while consequences are not directly related to people’s mental disposition, it is a redirection of pursuing good experience if people only focus on consequences and utilize all means without the consideration of process. Thus such demean in utilitarianism is neither sustainable.

The final stage of Phil’s attempts of seeking meanings of his life was a way of virtues, which verifies a stoic life. After he finds his urge to save the old dad who is deemed to die, he realizes the meaning of his life is to realize his value of existence. Every day he wakes up, he goes out to save the kid falling from the tree, fix the tires of old women’s car, etc. Besides, he also spends time to improve himself including learning to play the piano, ice engraving, and so on.

“Here ethics offer a solution. An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives. The view that there is harmony between ethics and enlightened self-interest is an ancient one, now often scorned. ...If the circle of ethics really does expand, and a higher ethical consciousness spreads, it will fundamentally change the society in which we

⁴ Sandel, Michael. *Justice, What’s the right thing to do?* Penguin. 2009. Page 86

live”⁵[Peter Singer, *The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle*]

Indeed, such stoic good life is persistent in enriching not only individuals’ life with meanings, but giving good to the running of society. While the intensity of pleasure or external feeling may not be as strong as behavior in other ideologies, stoic good life has the most sustainable good for people to pursue.

In general, after the comparison of different school of moral thoughts, we can see that a virtuous and stoic good life is the most sustainable one. While reality is a more complex and random version of metempsychosis, hope people can learn from the lessons in *Groundhog Day* and sustain individuals’ and society with the most virtuous and sustainable good life.

Bibliography

1. *Groundhog Day*. Directed by Harold Ramis. United State: Columbia Picture, 1993
2. Peter Singer, *The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle*
3. Sandel, Michael. *Justice, What’s the right thing to do?* Penguin. 2009
4. Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*

⁵ Peter Singer, *The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle*, Page 12