

Feature Article: JAF7356

ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL: Can Cloud Atlas Give True Hope for a Better World?

by John McAteer

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 35, number 06 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Cloud Atlas is a blessing for apologists. The film asks us to take its philosophical and religious ideas seriously and even argues that having true beliefs is important, since one's beliefs have consequences for one's actions. *Cloud Atlas* appears to affirm reincarnation, but this is only a symbol. The novel and the film are really about the universal human tendency to enslave others. Like most postmodern critical theorists, the authors of *Cloud Atlas* seek to unmask oppressive power structures. But, following Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, they place the source of political hierarchies in human nature (the will to power). The authors want to transcend self-will—which they rightly see as itself a kind of slavery to sin—but they don't see how. From a Christian perspective, *Cloud Atlas* is right that "we are bound to others," but the film gives us no realistic way to change oppressive structures grounded in human nature. According to *Cloud Atlas*, we just have to "believe" that it is possible to overcome selfishness and hold onto the hope that one day our revolution will come. Yet the fact that the authors believe in objective truth and universal human nature gives apologists a place to begin conversation. The apologist can show them that the will to power is not natural. It only seems natural because human nature is fallen and enslaved to sin. And our revolution has already come in Christ, who makes it possible for us to become a new creature in His resurrection.

Because *Cloud Atlas*¹ tells the stories of a soul reincarnated in six different lives from the nineteenth to the twenty-fourth centuries, many apologists will feel the need to mount a vigorous attack on the notion of reincarnation. Other apologists will debate the film's gender identity politics. Still others will critique its worldview, a philosophy very close to Arthur Schopenhauer's "Pessimism." I suggest a different approach. It certainly makes sense to take a critical approach to cultural texts whose assumptions conflict with Christianity. Yet it makes as much sense for apologists to find the seeds of truth in

a story and show how, when they have become fully grown, they blossom into Christianity. *Cloud Atlas* is particularly appropriate for this strategy.

IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

On the last page of the novel on which the film was based, young nineteenth-century lawyer Adam Ewing devotes himself to abolitionism. His racist father-in-law says there is a “natural order” in the world that keeps white men on top, and anyone who attempts to challenge that order will be “crucified” (p. 508). It is impossible to change “human nature,” he reasons, and the abolitionist cause will ultimately amount “to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean” (509). Yet Ewing is not swayed. If nothing changes, “a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself” into extinction (508). And change has to start somewhere: “What is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (509). As the narrator, Ewing writes, “If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being....If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* diverse races & creeds can share this world...such a world will come to pass” (508).

Ewing is arguing, as a worldview analyst would, that ideas have consequences. Later we will examine his claim that one’s beliefs are a *sufficient* cause of one’s actions, but here we can all agree that belief is *necessary* for action. We can only act according to what we believe is possible. This is why imaginative apologetics is so important, and it is why storytelling is a major theme in *Cloud Atlas*: the world we can imagine forms a frame (a worldview) around our mind that enables or prevents us from acting in certain ways.

THE “TRUE TRUE” AND THE “SEEMIN’ TRUE”

Novelist David Mitchell has said explicitly that he does not believe in reincarnation and that the novel’s use of reincarnation is “just a symbol, really, of the universality of human nature.”² Mitchell takes one story and “reincarnates” it in six different settings, told in six different styles and genres. The film adaptation by the Wachowskis (The Matrix trilogy) and Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*) extends the symbol of reincarnation in a slightly different direction. The filmmakers’ choice to cast the same actors in more than one role— including actors playing different races and genders— is an illustration of the view that one’s character is a “social construction.” We are all actors, the film suggests, and just as Tom Hanks can put on various costumes and play different roles, so can we. There is no “real” or “natural” biological basis for race and gender categories; rather, categories such as “white” and “black” or “male” and “female” are created by the way societies treat people and have only a superficial connection to biology.

This is what the young composer character Robert Frobisher means when he says in the film, “All boundaries are conventions. One can transcend a convention if only one can conceive of doing so.” According to the film, our race and gender categories are not “sacred and inviolable” (as one character in the nineteenth-century story describes the natural order). As conventions, they are socially constructed and can be changed if

they become oppressive. The filmmakers are rejecting what is called gender and racial “essentialism” —not surprising, given the fact that one of the filmmakers is transgendered.³

This is all pretty standard in the academic field of “queer theory,” which uses postmodern deconstruction to further a gay political agenda. I’ll leave it to others to work out the best apologetic response to queer theory and deconstructionism. What I want to emphasize here is the combination of the film’s affirmation of social construction *along with* the novel’s affirmation of universal human nature. Intentionally or not, the film ends up recognizing that a certain type of essentialism is actually entailed by deconstruction. The claim that everyone on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) spectrum is *equally human* rejects gender essentialism but assumes essentialism about *human nature*.

So even if our gender roles are social constructions, there still must be such a thing as human nature that we all share. And if this is true, then there must be some universal truths about how human nature flourishes and how it is most appropriate to treat human beings. Despite their suspicion of absolute truth, most postmodernists are motivated by a pursuit of justice for all human beings. Justice, they claim, deconstructs power plays that mask themselves as truth claims. None other than Jacques Derrida says explicitly that justice itself cannot be deconstructed.⁴ So pursuit of justice for racial and gender minorities motivates the film’s attempt to envision an alternative to essentialism. Thus we can find in *Cloud Atlas* an objective basis of ethics.

Indeed, *Cloud Atlas* intentionally affirms the objectivity of ethical truth. In the novel the murderous Dr. Henry Goose asserts on “scientific” social Darwinian grounds that human beings are merely “joints of meat” and hence raw material to serve the appetite of those in power. He rejects the view that we are “sacred beings crafted in the Almighty’s image” (503). But Goose turns out to be one of the worst villains in the story, and his view is clearly condemned by the author’s perspective.

Conversely, in the novel the runaway slave Autua is a member of the Moriori tribe whose principle of nonviolence the author presents in a positive light. The Moriori believed “whosoever spilt a man’s blood killed his [own] *mana*—his honor, his worth, his standing & his soul” (12). The postapocalyptic Valleysmen hold a similar belief: Zachary reasons that he shouldn’t kill a man from the enemy Kona tribe, because he could just as well have been born a Kona himself: “If I’d been rebirthed a Kona in this life, he could be me an’ I’d be killin’ myself” (301). Because we’re all equally human, killing someone else is like killing yourself.

In short, the filmmakers accept the objective truth of essential human nature as a foundation of morality. Constructivism is not used to support radical relativism, but merely to point to a deeper truth. As Zachary notes in the novel, “The true true is diff’rent to the seemin’ true” (274). Similarly, the fabricant Sonmi-451 responds to a query about her “version of the truth” by saying “truth is singular. Its ‘versions’ are mistruths” (185). In the film she says truth is so important that “we must all fight, and if necessary die, to teach people the truth.” This affirmation of objective truth is where the

Christian apologist might be able to find a foothold for fruitful conversation, an “altar to the unknown God” (Acts 17:23).⁵

THE HUMAN “HUNGER FOR MORE”

So *Cloud Atlas* affirms universal human nature. But what does it affirm *about* universal human nature? The villain characters believe that human nature is essentially egoistic and argue for a sort of social Darwinist ethics according to which we all ought to pursue our own self-interest and the survivor is morally justified in virtue of his strength. Thus, as Rev. Horrox argues in the film’s nineteenth century story, a colonialism-caused “extinction” of the Aborigines would be “God’s Will.”

In the film the theme of Darwinian competition is established right from the start. The film begins with Zachary being tempted by a Devil-like spirit named Old Georgie. A few scenes later, Old Georgie says, “The weak are meat that the strong do eat.” Toward the end of the film (and in the book), Dr. Goose quotes the same proverb to justify his plot to murder Adam Ewing, saying it is the “one rule that binds all people together.” This social Darwinist slogan ceases to be metaphorical when civilization collapses and the strong literally become cannibals.

But the authorial viewpoint of *Cloud Atlas* suggests that, though egoism may be human nature, it cannot be good, because unbridled egoism is self-destructive. As Ewing says, “A purely predatory world *shall* consume itself.” At one point, Zachary asks Meronym who caused the nuclear holocaust. Using biblically allusive language, Zachary wonders, “Who tripped the Fall?” The primitive tribesmen had always attributed the Fall to Old Georgie, but Meronym says it was actually the pre-apocalyptic human civilization. They may have had enough intelligence to master nature through technology, but they couldn’t master human nature: they “din’t master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o’ humans, yay, a hunger for more” (272). Human nature can even enslave us. In the novel the narrator of the 1970s story says there are “powers inside us that are not us” (402), recalling Paul’s discussion of sin acting in us against our will in Romans 7 and the “principalities and powers” of Ephesians such as “the prince of the power of the air” who is “at work in” sinners (Eph. 2:2).

Ironically, then, *all* the characters in the film are slaves. The “weaker,” less aggressive characters become slaves to the “stronger” characters, but the oppressors are themselves slaves of their own will. No one, it seems, can escape Old Georgie. There is no “progress” in history, because human nature is unchangeable. Rev. Horrox’s “Ladder of Civilization” is an illusion that leads nowhere. *Cloud Atlas* argues that we may try to “civilize” ourselves and adopt new technologies in the name of progress, even eventually acquiring the ability to genetically alter our bodies and create “fabricant” clones, but we can never leave behind human nature’s “hunger for more.” The only truly “civ’lized” people, Meronym tells Zachary in the novel, are those who have learned to master their inner hunger and are no longer slaves to their own “savage” will (303).

According to *Cloud Atlas*, then, one’s level of civilization is completely independent of one’s level of technology, for the primitive tribesman can be more

civilized than the most futuristic society (and vice versa). Thus there is no guarantee that the future will be better than the past. Quite the contrary: given human nature, there is a guarantee that the future will contain exactly the same challenges as the present. As Ecclesiastes says, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9).

ETERNAL RECURRENCE AND THE WORLD AS WILL

The explicit references to Nietzsche in both the novel and the film invite us to interpret the rejection of progress in terms of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" and to read the innate human "hunger for more" as Nietzsche's "will to power."⁶ Indeed, in the 1930s storyline, Frobisher's first major composition is titled "Eternal Recurrence"! But despite these Nietzsche references, the worldview presented by *Cloud Atlas* is closer to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, himself an important influence on Nietzsche. For Nietzsche the myth of eternal recurrence was supposed to help us *affirm* the world, whereas *Cloud Atlas* sees the endless cycle of history in terms of Schopenhauer's "Pessimism."

In his major work *The World as Will and Representation* (originally published in 1818), Schopenhauer set out to synthesize Plato, Kant, and Hinduism, and he ended up with something very much like Buddhism. According to Schopenhauer, the world of ordinary things is an illusion. We represent the world to ourselves as individual objects, but underneath our experience of ordinary life, the world is essentially one undifferentiated reality that Schopenhauer calls "Will." Using the term "Will" is not meant to personalize or deify ultimate reality, but is meant to reveal reality as a kind of energy or force that moves things to protect their own existence. Schopenhauer called it "the will to life." In human beings, we call this egoism.

But, Schopenhauer argued, egoistically pursuing our desires is self-defeating and leads to suffering, since Will is never satisfied and always needs more. In pursuing our own will, we are trapped in a cycle of frustration at not having the object of our will and then satisfaction at achieving our desire, which inevitably leads to boredom and the need to generate new desires. Our salvation comes in recognizing the illusoriness of the world and renouncing the ceaseless Will that causes suffering. This recognition can be sparked by aesthetic experience, especially music—which Schopenhauer said was a direct expression of Will itself and hence helps us see through the illusions of Representation. But salvation is better achieved through asceticism and the devotion of one's life to altruism. In compassionate, selfless action we overcome the illusion of Representation and recognize that we are essentially one with others insofar as we are all expressions of the same Will. And we learn to stop pursuing our will over others' will, thus releasing ourselves from the frustration/boredom cycle of Will.

So in Schopenhauer we have the same themes as *Cloud Atlas*: (1) self-defeating egoism as the source of suffering and (2) affirmation of the unity of all things as a justification of altruism. Here again, we can understand Frobisher's line, "All boundaries are conventions. One can transcend a convention if only one can conceive of doing so." The distinctions we make between things are merely representations that can

be transcended. His next line is, "Separation is an illusion. My life extends far beyond me," making the Schopenhauerean basis for his claim clear: we are all part of the same underlying ultimate reality.

PESSIMISM, HOPE, AND SALVATION

At this point we come to the most important difference between the novel and the film and the key moment for apologetic critique. In the novel, salvation is a Buddhist/Schopenhauerean loss of individual self. As Sonmi says when she sees the ocean for the first time, "All the woe of the words 'I am' seemed dissolved there, painlessly, peacefully" (339), anticipating Ewing's affirmation at the end of the novel that he is willing to give his life for the abolitionist cause even if that means becoming "a drop in a limitless ocean" (509). As with Schopenhauer, novelist David Mitchell has no hope that things will ever change, hence the symbol of having the same story and characters eternally recur. According to the novel, the best we can do is remain uncorrupted by self-will and work to make social structures as just as we can in our own time, knowing full well that new forms of slavery will arise in the future. This is pure Schopenhauerean Pessimism.

But the filmmakers are more hopeful. They add a new ending in which the postapocalyptic survivors are taken to another planet, a new earth where a new community is established based on love instead of competition. Thus, Tykwer and the Wachowskis imagine an eschatological utopia that provides an escape from the cycle of self-will. They even imagine this in biblical terms. When she attempts to contact human colonists in space, Meronym hopes "someone will hear [her] prayer and come down from the sky." (Compare Frobisher: "I have to believe there is another world waiting for us.")

From a Schopenhaueran point of view, the filmmakers are making a mistake. How could a utopia of selflessness ever come about if reality is essentially Will? In its eschatological vision, the film is attempting to give us the kind of imaginary projection of the future that can make us believe the future can be different and thus can allow us to bring about that future. As the film puts it, "Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb we are bound to others, past and present. And with each crime and every kindness we birth our future." If we can realize that we are "bound" together by something other than Dr. Goose's "rule" of selfishness ("the weak are meat") and that oppressive hierarchies are only based on social conventions, we can change things and "birth" a better future.

Here the apologist should argue: while imagination is necessary for change, *simply* imagining a new possibility is not sufficient for change. There must be an agent capable of actualizing the possibility. From a Christian point of view, we can agree that imagination is a start, but we know that new possibilities can only be fulfilled through Christ. Paul admonishes us not to be "conformed" to the world's way of thinking, but to imagine new possibilities for life and be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). Only then can we be united as "one body" in which we are each "individually members of one another" and self-will is revealed to be self-destructive

(Rom. 12:5). Likewise, Paul calls us to have the “mind” of Christ—to think about the world the way Christ did—so that we, too, can “empty” ourselves of self-will (Phil. 2:5–8). Presumably, part of the way we learn the mind of Christ is through the stories about Him in the Gospels. But it is only possible for us to imitate Christ, because He has *already* embodied a life of perfect love.

Cloud Atlas might be able to accept this much. Arguably, each story’s main character is only able to act selflessly by reading/watching an account of the previous story. But, again, the Christian apologist should press the point that merely *knowing* the right thing does not make it possible to *do* the right thing. The film recognizes our enslavement to “the powers inside us that are not us” (sin), but has no way to free us from this slavery. What the film is missing is a concept of the Fall, without which it is impossible to imagine an alternative way of being human. Only if the will to power is not truly human nature—only if we distinguish *fallen* human nature from *original* human nature—can we overcome self-will without ceasing to be human. Likewise, the film also lacks a concept of a transcendent Savior. The film is not radical enough. It recognizes a need for a savior from outside our social system (i.e., from another planet), but the hope for salvation can’t simply be more human beings with the same human nature. We need the God who created our original human nature to *recreate* human nature as it was meant to be.

We need the Christ who says, “I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5; cf. Isa. 43:19), for we are all “new creations” in His resurrection (2 Cor. 5:17).

John McAteer is assistant professor of philosophy at Houston Baptist University. Before receiving his Ph.D., he earned a B.A. in film from Biola University and an M.A. in philosophy of religion and ethics from Talbot School of Theology.

NOTES

- 1 This film is rated R.
- 2 From a BBC Radio interview, quoted in the Wikipedia article on the film. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_Atlas_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_Atlas_(novel)).
- 3 One of the Wachowski brothers, Larry, now identifies as a woman and calls herself Lana.
- 4 On Derrida’s claim that justice is “undeconstructible,” see John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 63ff.
- 5 All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
- 6 On the “will to power” as an innate human instinct toward egoism, see *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 13. On “eternal return” as a mythological cosmology, which portrays history as an endless cycle, see *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Part III, in the section titled, “The Convalescent.”