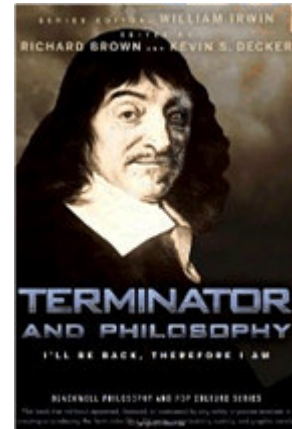


TERMINATOR AND PHILOSOPHY

I'll be back therefore I am

by William Irwin et al

This book was purchased for me by a friend who thought it looked like "the sort of material I'd be into." And she was right. Actually, I had never heard of the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series of books, much less this particular item—which poses age-old questions of free will, personhood, the man-machine relationship, and so on. Very cool concept to merge such deep discussions with the characters and actions in a major movie like James Cameron's Terminator series.



The overall quality of the writing is first class, and one is struck immediately by the depth of academic knowledge of each of the writers. Which makes sense, because many of them are gentlemen and ladies with professorial credentials: meaning they've read all the classics from authors we college students in the humanities were assigned to read: Descartes, Kant, Hobbes, Mill, Bentham, and a host of others.

The advantage of approaching areas of philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics—through pop culture is that these subjects become relevant to the average person. Also, the writing tends to be less academic and more in tune with the times. The disadvantage lies in running the risk of 'dumbing down' the analyses; however, judged by this Terminator and Philosophy book, any such diminishment is not present at all. In fact, quite the opposite: instead of poring over paragraph after dense paragraph of ponderous prose intended to impress cloistered academics, the reader finds a much more conversational and less pretentious flow of the ideas. Not a romance-novelette read by any means, but certainly an entertaining-while-informative one.

The first observation I noted, from Jesse W. Butler's article, "Un-terminated: The Integration of the Machines," concerns self-awareness in an age when the Singularity[1] is near:

Intelligent machines are best understood as natural extensions of our own intelligence, rather than independent forces of their own. In fact, as some philosophers and scientists have argued, we can understand ourselves as machines, and even as cyborgs. Maybe our minds and bodies are best treated as biological machines, inextricably intertwined with the nonbiological technology we produce. — page 54

Which folds into the idea of the Singularity itself, broached more specifically later in the same article. Citing Richard Dawkins idea of 'extended phenotype,' Butler summarizes:

In other words, what you are as a biological organism doesn't end at your skin but rather extends out into your interaction with your environment, including the various artifacts you make and use. Consider beaver dams and spider webs [as Dawkins favorite examples]. — page 62

In the not too long run, as Ray Kurzweil, founder of the Singularity idea, points out, humans will merge with their technology creations to become essentially another life form, individually and collectively. [My uncertain grasp of Kurzweil's prognosis is we will then be seeding a 'universal intelligence' (whether hierarchical or distributed) that will populate the cosmos, much as inanimate matter prevails now.

It's also nice as a new reader of such pop-culture enhanced philosophical queries to find some old assumptions challenged. For example, as a college Randian and Recovering Objectivist[2], I came to believe that Immanuel Kant was the equivalent of the Devil. Of course, I hadn't even bothered to read the CliffsNotes treatment of the man's work. What Rand and other Objectivist writers represented of him was enough to see he had some blind spots. But Harry Chotiner's piece, "I know why you cry...," points out some admirable positions on reason and liberty for ol Manny, with which you could be the hit of your local Objectivist Meetup gathering or Libertarian Party function. As in:

The relevance of this idea [that humans have reasoning power] for Kant's moral theory has to do with what we rational humans can do to achieve our goals and ends. For Kant, a bedrock limit is that we cannot use other people as a means to our ends, and they cannot use us a means to their ends. — page 74

It's difficult to read that segment and not be inclined to check out Kant—or the Harry Chotiner version or CliffsNotes—for myself. What's the big deal, I'm asking. Moreover, each one of the authors in this pop series book seems to bring a point of view one might consider odd or even contradictory to some of the philosophical positions you may have held at one time. Jeffrey Ewing's, "James Cameron's Marxist Revolution," is perhaps the most extreme, at least for yours truly. Ewing makes a convincing, or at least plausible, argument that James Cameron's protagonists in Terminator favor a world that Karl Marx would have wanted:

In particular, Cameron's films share with Marx the perspectives that a) the development of technology in capitalism tends to be harmful and dangerous and b) technology is not naturally harmful, but can be reclaimed to make us more free. — page 93

That is a fairly incredible assertion to me. And the subsequent discussion brings up characteristics and positions in the Marx oeuvre that I would not have expected. Further, just as I'm now inclined to reexamine Kant, I'm inclined as well to reexamine Marx. Truth be told, it's more like 'examine,' because I have relied on third-party assessments almost exclusively through the years.

This kind of ideas' back and forth is what I'm missing now. I recall in my salad days with the Libertarian Party and in the libertarian movement in general, one of the principle incentives was the opportunity to mix it up and have some general discussion on what's important. Back then, we even had a smattering of holdout leftists to contend with. I even miss them. Also, book discussion clubs abounded when I was a young libertarian, and I'd like to see them emerge again, if too much "hardening of the categories" hasn't set in.

So if you like smooth layout of serious ideas, this is your kind of book.

[1] *The Singularity is Near* (2005) is the watershed book by Ray Kurzweil that presents a solid foundation for the idea that man and machine will one day become as one... and much sooner than a lot of people—accustomed to thinking of change as linear rather than exponential—are aware.

[2] Recovering Objectivist is my tongue-in-cheek term for one who admires the radical individualism and rationality of the Ayn Rand philosophy, but has taken his psychological independence into uncharted territory (e.g. life extension) or unapproved territory (e.g. libertarianism). That is uncharted or unapproved by Rand and the current Objectivist movement's PTBs (powers that be).

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