

# Seven pounds - ethics



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The delivery of this assignment is going to expound the notion of ethics in relation to the film *Seven Pounds*, from two main dimensions – In this regard narrative ethics serves as the central framework for a deep appreciation of bioethics. Central to the bioethical themes is that of suicide and organ donation. As regards the latter, it is a highly contested argument to question on what particular grounds a person can be qualified as being good or bad , and to what extent should organs be donated to sustain one’s welfare . Since the realm of bioethics is highly complex, it is pertinent if not imperative to contrast the subjective perspective of diverse schools of thought , including the utilitarian , deontological the Christian and the purely secular perspective . The latter perspective needs to be highlighted in depth since *seven pounds* reflects a deep secular background of the postmodernist culture of the US{United States} In this respect this presentation is going to adopt an integrated approach so as to evaluate ethical thought in comprehensive terms, and on the basis of mature insights.

It is relevant to present the following inspirational viewpoints highlighted by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*, this film critic questions – “ Why, you might ask, should we care how people think and feel about stories? Why do we talk about them in this language of value?”(Kwame Anthony Appiah 2006.) . Evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world..... and that alignment is , in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric , the texture of our relationships..... “ In this respect it is essential to note, that Appiah being a reputed film critic is not only strongly hinting to us the need that we enjoy the beauty of stories. Moreover in the process, we need

to venture a step ahead by reflecting on the multiple dynamics of the social fabric, and how this is impacting as well as being impacted by our personal life. In this respect Seven Pounds represents a profound filmic experience, which probes deeply within “ the texture of our relationships “

This presentation is going to focus on an ethical perspective of Seven Pounds written by Grant Nieporte and released by Columbia Pictures. A unique characteristic on the part of Grant Nieporte is that he persistently seeks to blend his subjective personal experiences, within the wider social context . The underlying objective is to capitalize on the indirect experience of others , this logically conduces to a higher level of maturity. The spark of the inspiration of Seven Pounds occurred to Grant, when he was in a bar and came across the subject during a typical conversation. The respondent confessed to Grant that he wanted to commit suicide for purposes of redemption of an accident which he personally committed and contributed to the innocent loss of life.

The film attained a reasonable level of success, possibly due to the fact that the audience tends in general to be more interested to the entertainment factor, rather than the profound philosophic deductive message. The latter in the context of this film deals with both psychological and personal issues. The focus is on the reciprocal relationship between the filmic experience {which is fictitious} and the purely ethical domain. The film industry is constantly experiencing revolutionary changes, as regards film genre backed by a constant stream of innovative technologies, reflecting a social mentality undergoing a rapid stage of transition.

The film being essentially a cinematic medium represents an authentic message of values. Thus, it is pertinent on the part of the audience, to identify and assess these values within the context of the contemporary emerging culture. From a critical angle the members of the civic public, seek to be trend followers without critically questioning whether the direction of the social trends are worth pursuing.

The public tends to appreciate films in terms of their bare narrative rather than more meaningful ethical implications and this demands that the audience be more directly educated in this respect.

Narrative is thus undeniably a strategic ingredient incorporating diverse forms of ethical analysis. We will all do better to be more self-conscious about the literary nature of ethical understanding and assessment. It remains to be seen however whether narrative would ever be in a position to supplant an ethic also reinforced by principles and theory.

It is deemed important that the narrative of the film is expanded so as to reflect the *modus Vivendi* of the characters. The subjective perception of the presenter is in line with that of many film critics who observed that the initial scenes represent a set of chronologically scrambled set sequences. Thus the audience has to engage itself not only emotionally but also intellectually in understanding the role of the characters and their respective interrelationships. The element of conflict on both an intra and inter personal level, is the driving force of the plot. The protagonist who drives along the movie plot is Ben Thomas which is acted by Will Smith. Ben gets into an auto accident when he is using his cell phone whilst driving. So far Ben has been

a highly successful American citizen, both in his love relationship as well as well as in his highly reputed profession . One can assume that he has attained this success due to diverse interblended ingredients. Foremost we can include his wit, intelligence, practicality and skills in handling people . From the initial film shots; he is presented as being highly energetic. Ben has engineered an optimum balance in life with a highly meaningful and motivating vision which he is seeking persistently to accomplish and satisfy competing interests. In substance he is a highly ambitious person, possibly overambitious within all the aspects of the spectrum of life he came in contact with. One can observe that Ben had a high level of positive energy within him. His primary fulfillment was to transform the challenges of life into meaningful opportunities. In the accident which ultimately developed in a tragic outcome, he accidentally kills his fiancé , who was riding with him together with six strangers other when he lost control of his car and crushes into another vehicle . Ironically enough the author of the accident emerged from the scene unscratched . However the audience only realizes the outcome of the tragedy towards the end point of the film . This heightens the element of suspense on the part of the audience . This technique of revealing strategic information towards the end of the film, as well as adopting diverse types of flashbacks so as to transform the filmic experience into a half puzzle, or in simple terms a combination of puzzle film narration , melodrama and fiction is typical of the 60 s era art film . This reflects subtle elements of the post classical thriller as well as the crime film . An interesting factor is that the accident which took place within the space of a few seconds, definitely had generated a powerful impact on the life of Ben . Ben fell into a serious and profound irreversible depression. His face from

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this point onwards throughout the film appeared masked , so as to conceal the hidden turmoil , together with the dark and somber intentions on the part of Ben.

One can observe that the guilt feelings within Ben generated due to the accident which precipitated, have reshaped completely his psychological perceptions on life . This is appreciated to the extent that he was transformed in a different “ being” having a particular mind set . In this critical situation immersed in a profound depression he was definitely not in a position to take decisions about his own personal life, let alone being accountable to others. Among the factors which have inspired the audience, he had lost the love of his girlfriend . She could have served as the intimate person who could have helped him in order to ride the tide.

From a figurative aspect, the seven fatalities by Ben conduce to the endorsement of a debt-at least on a psychological plane . This debt entails a pound of flesh for each victim . From an analytical view point this presents a self imposed burden . However Ben is persistently believing that he is acting out of good faith . The underlying logic of Seven Pounds is that wealth is necessary for true charity, because in order to be charitable, one needs to have something to give such as the accumulation of wealth. In fact Ben went out of his way in granting his beach house to a female who was the victim of domestic violence . More importantly he had communicated with the female in a letter which he dispatched to her , so as to “ live abundantly ” . The term “ live abundantly”, resonates Utilitarian thinking. This approach needs to be appreciated within the context of the highly secular culture of the U. S in terms of Ben’s frame of thought , to take the best for oneself out of life .

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However in practice how far did Ben manage to adopt this particular message within his own philosophy ?. It appears that it is easier to preach to others rather than to council oneself . One cannot but ask -Was Ben in this particular circumstance seeking the privilege status of a demi god ? . A clear factor which transpires at this point is that Ben definitely was facing a confused state of mind , and subsequently his personal priorities had changed .

The dialogue is carefully crafted so as to reflect the stream of consciousness on the part of the characters, and to ensure an intellectual form of participation on the part of the audience . Ben is becoming aware of the psychological changes within him. In fact he comments in an intimate manner with Emily that “ I haven’t been taking care of myself lately “. The term care has multiple meanings, and it is very difficult to specify in a precise manner to what particular type of care Ben is referring to. This is understood in view of the different mindset which Ben has developed throughout the immediate post tragedy period . Certain critics have identified Ben as this point as having a “ confused mind “ However this is not a fair judgment in objective terms since Ben has developed a specific intention of his ultimate goal-the donation of his personal intimate body organs to others.

Ben started scheming by analyzing the characters of diverse individuals so as to serve as worthy recipients of his own organs . He was very smart and original in the particular process of scheming adopted. He took the identification card of his brother who worked as an IRS officer . When his brother realized that his card was missing he recalled the attention of Ben .

Ben in an intelligent manner replied “ If I recall rightly I gave you something “ In this respect one can note that Ben is highly tactful in presenting an effective defense mechanism especially in situations in which he is undergoing a very profound torment.

In the process of Ben getting to know Emily, he was fully aware of his love towards Emily. It is essential to evaluate the motives highlighting the shift of reasoning on the part of Ben . Emily is suffering from an eminent heart failure being only a matter of a few weeks up to her death . Ben is ready to go out of his way and donate his heart to Emily. However it is important to note, that his act towards her is going to be carried out as an act of love, rather than merely an act of redemption . The sexual act involving Ben and Emily has no intrinsic meanings. However it helped both protagonists so as to clarify their respective minds. An interesting fact is that events from this point onwards developed as if designed by an invisible hand in a timetabled manner . Ben phoned his intimate friend being a lawyer , and asserted in highly emotional terms that “ it is time ” . This is a straight forward declaration, however it also reflects that Ben ‘ s commitments in terms of his goals were on the point of being realized .

Seven Pounds is centered or actually revolves around the central theme of suicide. This acts as a pivotal platform around which one finds a number of secondary themes which are directly interwoven . Foremost among the secondary themes the state of redemption on the part of the protagonist, which can be interpreted in terms of both altruism and indifference . Other themes were egoism, self centeredness, and living on the edge and following a self imposed lifestyle of emargination. Durkheim identified four types of <https://assignbuster.com/seven-pounds-ethics/>



suicide, egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic, based on degrees of imbalance of two social forces being social integration and moral regulation. The exposition of socially vulnerable members within society is clearly contrasted with the life style of affluence on the part of the protagonist.

Thanks to the language of values, being exposed via the cinematic medium, the author details both the virtues and vices of the characters, scrutinizes their choices, and analysis the ethical relevant particularities of their situation as well as the distinct elements linked to justice or injustice of the social world the characters outlined within the film inhabit . Why however should one care about how these authors think and feel about these cinematic narratives? It is my aim that the philosophical, legal, medical, moral, anthropological, literary, psychological and sociological expertise that these authors bring to bear within their films, generate a profound philosophical reflection among viewers, whilst helping to clarify, refine and challenge the ethical positions, the members of the civic public hold bioethical approaches.

The central underlying theme of suicide involves basic principles and fundamental moral rules. One needs to question -What is it that makes an action morally acceptable or unacceptable? Is this due to the inherent characteristics of the action, or rather due to its consequences? Most ethical thinkers argue that death is an unpleasant reality which mankind will have to experience sooner or later being part of the cyclical process of existence . However if death is unpleasant and suicide is a genre of death, is it immoral? Whenever one affirms that suicide is immoral, this implies it that it is rationally unacceptable. It may be argued that in certain situations , suicide

is the ideal option, in view of its long-term consequence . For the person who is committing suicide, what counts is that he frees himself/herself from a permanent and inescapable state of suffering. Thus the agent in this case perceives suicide as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself . Some ethical thinkers refer to this approach as being integrated with consequential ethics focusing on further applications of the act . The consequentialist ethical approach assesses the future direction of an act within different time scenarios.

A further bioethical issue which needs to be granted paramount importance concerns a deep assessment of both the feelings and the thoughts of those impacted by suicide. The notion of consequentialism surfaces at different phases of the film . The act of suicide creates unnecessary distress to the family and friends, although these are still outweighed by the person himself. Life is a matter of choices and this applies to all the protagonists within the film, every choice represents a mixed package, having both positive and negative implications.

Although the loved ones close to the victim of suicide regret the situation, however they tend to agree at the end “ at least they are not in pain or agony “.

It is imperative at this stage to focus on the Utilitarian Perspective . The central maxim of the utilitarian approach is the production of happiness for the greatest number , so that in this particular manner, both suffering as well as misery will be minimized . From the utilitarian’s stand point the morality of suicide is a double edged reality . It emerges that although the actions on

the part of the victim of suicide can produce positive results relative to his/her objectives, the act of suicide still remains morally unacceptable by the utilitarian .

At the other side of the spectrum Deontology stresses that the right to life outweighs consequences . This approach focuses on the consequences and other morally relevant factors . The factor under consideration in terms of its wider implications, is not just the result to be attained but more significantly the specific means adopted for the attainment of the results. The means adopted for the production of the act, definitely harms innocent people. This conduces to a new line of thought which has not been tackled by the utilitarians , It needs to explicitly stated that it is never legitimate to harm innocent people . However whenever an act is done to oneself, it implies that the individual particularly consented to it . The consent principle is highly relevant at this point , thus on ethical terms one needs to distinguish between consent carried out when the individual is sane and competent , keeping in view the objectives behind the consent . This is based on the constructive grounds that the concept principle cannot be judged at face value, but rather in terms of the particular situational context in which it occurs.

One needs to bring under review the particular situations in which a specific individual is behaving . In this respect, one needs to distinguish between acting under distress as well as acts which are not carried out for the appropriate moral ends . The deontological approach states in explicit terms that one must never permit and allow a person to commit suicide . There is a

tendency that we do fail to think critically about death , and in most situations , we tend to avoid if not disregard the subject completely .

The rationality of suicide is assessed at this stage. There are two central questions which need to be granted paramount importance are -when if ever would it be true that one is better off dead? The underlying contest of this question concerns whether there are specific situation where it is more worthy to be dead then to be alive. Another concerns -could it be rational on the part of the individual to kill oneself? This implies an assessment whether suicide or at least certain types of suicide represent a rational act. One must keep in view that although Ben appears highly depressed in most of the situations of the film , yet he was equally focused . The latter implies that he was fully conscious of the rationality and logic of his own actions . It is important to highlight that insightful and critical judgments need to be carried out both before and after a particular act . From a Christian moral perspective it is both immoral and unethical to state that it is better to be dead then being alive . This is because the state of death once experienced cannot restore the individual back to life , and that human life retains a special and unique dignity. Although ethical thinkers tend to adhere to different viewpoints, one thing is certain; being dead is deprivation of good things in life. Individuals who feel life as meaningful journey enjoying the benefits of love, accomplishment and happiness these are directly linked to the spiritual dimension alternatively whenever these benefits are lacking in one's life, life will lose its dignity, and its virtues of beauty will perish.

In the Nichomachean ethics Aristotle way back in the classical age advocated that “ The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people ,

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and, further , as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised " this perspective is highly applicable to the particular scene in which Ben Thomas explodes in anger at the old people's home . in addition Aristotle argued that anger , as a virtue , has an excess a deficiency and a mean . Aristotle stressed that the mean is gentleness. Whenever one gets excessively angry then he is considered wrathful. Moreover whenever one is deficient in anger than he is timid.

One of the greatest concerns of suicide victims {as often evidenced but the content of their notes} is the pain they may cause to the loved ones they leave behind . Whilst the suicide of a loved one may be an almost an impossible event to accept, it may be of some assistance in the healing process for those that left behind, to know that the death of their loved ones death did help save others lives. This can be expounded in terms of the brother of Tim . This knowledge has been known to be helpful to family members of people who die by other means resulting in organ donation.

It is essential to focus at this particular stage on the deductive element of the film . This is centered around the motif of Redemption at the cost of one's life . The two major commanding motifs of the film are moralism and subjectivity . They are fruit of post modernism played out . They affirm that there is no absolute moral or ethical decision , only the moral or ethical subjectivity on the part of the critic . Further they affirm that there is a good and bad aspect that dwell inside of all of us . Subsequently if I became conscious of this dualism, and work at it, I can overpower the bad that is in me, with the good that is in me. In the end, I would have saved myself.

A thorny bioethical issue which remains unresolved concerns -on what particular grounds can one determine a good from a bad person . The first question arose because of a seemingly trivial conversation between Ben and George the hockey coach . George asks “ why me ? “ The claim that someone is a good person is made on a daily basis, but what justifies this belief when one makes an ethical statement? . Conversely, we have all stated that someone is a “ bad person “. Implicit in these claims are an appeal to some standard . One can recognize something bad if they have some idea about what is good . The movies writhing theme seems to be drawing on a shared intuition . An intuition that ethical theory attempts to understand in holistic terms.

A directed donation of organs to strangers is highly polemical since it challenges the perspective that an organ is a ‘ gift of life’, rather than a mere commodity which can be commercially marketed. However the ethical debate as regards Seven Pounds gets a step further.

On what particular criteria can one decide that a potential recipient of an organ merits their donation, on the basis of being good . The latter needs to be appreciated since it is already polemical in donating organs, when cases are chosen on the basis of race, religion ethnicity -In this respect it is imperative to note non directed donations raises different ethical concerns. The radical altruism that motivates a person to make a potentially life threatening sacrifice for a stranger calls for careful scrutiny. One needs to question whether Ben is seeking compensation for depression.

One must implement standards for both directive and non directed donation prohibiting transplantation when the chance of success is insufficient to justify the risks. Comprehensive oversight is necessary if the ethical pitfalls are to be adequately addressed.

**The message in this film is interpreted by the audience as being a bioethical claim, a claim giving the impression that suicide is permissible in this particular context.**

After reviewing Ben's life, one has to be highly sensitive and prudent of the ethical approach . Ben's life deviates from the ideal Christian virtues.

However it does not mean his end action is completely selfless , most, if even considering these actions would at least want some sort of acknowledgment . Ben was haunted and not fully in possession of his rational faculty by the end of the film . . Morally one must fully understand that Ben has a profoundly disturbed personality due to the unpredicted circumstances which he has experienced . Like many on the path of success his character floated above the real world . This ignorant autonomy and arrogance led to the tragic crash, both in the death of seven individuals and generated a profound detrimental impact on the life of the protagonist

Likewise Seven Pounds has a double sided appeal, incorporating profound sociological, psychological and ethical implications. . Muccino is highly inspired by Italian neorealism which marks a sharp contrast with American postmodernism . To a substantial degree, these two different sociological approaches mirror two distinct cultures which have attained distinct levels of socio and ethical development . The anthropological factor needs to be granted sufficient importance within this context . The southern

Mediterranean cultures in part the Italian counterpart tend to perceive individuals as part of a wider social web , having both a formal and informal character . Thus whenever individual face critical problems kinship pressures will help the individual to restore the balance however this is not the case within the context of the American capitalist society ., In fact Muccino's vision creates a kind of sympathy for ordinary Americans who struggle to get by . according to Muccino's perception " the American society is very cynical, very severe with those who fail, there is no safety net, when you fail straight down ."

The ethical notion of altruism in the context of this film is highly debatable. . Am I doing what is right or am I merely serving my ego. Is there such a thing as a good deed or am I in fact putting others in my debt as a way to control or use them to redeem myself . These questions have been highly inspired by Albert Camus in view of the particular approaches and interpretations of life. When the film was released, the world was undergoing a recession and many citizens interpreted altruism in terms of material goods, not in terms of body organs.

Certain critics have interpreted this film as being in substance an assault on the Judeo /Christian ethic . However one needs to question whether this assault is justified . One needs to recognize that not only suicide is a sin, it is the sin . it is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence, the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life . The man who kills a man kills a man. The man who kills himself kills all men . As far as he is concerned he wipes out the world. His act is worse symbolically considered than any rape or desperate outrage for it is a challenge and indifference to



creation . from the Christian moral perspective one can identify to main lines of thought on the one hand there is the traditional more conservative perspective particularly as regards the notion of suicide , from the other end of the scale is a fresh contemporary perspective as regards the values of human life , and the particular purpose and values which need to be attributed to it .

The film was watched and critically evaluated on a number of occasions since its narrative and postmodernist ethical aspects could not otherwise be appreciated. Within the ethical dimension this film generated a powerful sensation, since it combined strong secular and utilitarian approaches on the particular manner how one perceives the complex and dynamic reality within a mature industrial context. It is worthy to note that the film is a fictitious story.

From a subjective analytical perspective, it results that we are presented with an unusual genre project, partly melodramatic and partly being a puzzle film. As commercial film its plot is not straightforward , but includes a high degree of narrational ambiguity . This because it includes occasional flashbacks, which towards the terminal part of the film tend to become more frequent, and these feedbacks provide sufficient food for thought . In my regard seven pounds is a very specific story which has a profound moral message . This is coulered by a high degree of pathos or profound emotional impact which motivates the audience so as to participate directly within the life of the protagonist.

A profound moral stand point concerns that suicide is simply wrong even if it is carried out for redemption . However does a suicide enacted out of redemption or out of love for others makes sense. Within the context of the Christian morality all sorts of suicide regardless of the particular objective they were carried need to be condemned . This is because life has a sacrosanct identity. From a purely Christian point of view, the actions carried out by Ben are acts of blasphemy , and definitely in line with the message of Christ . This film created a very powerful sensational uproar particularly within highly secular societies foremost the United States , which have already advanced in depth within the post modernist culture- In this respect the film would definitely create a profound sensation in Malta, were catholic values are still relatively strong . It is recommended in this respect that the audience who are appropriate to enjoy the film need to be sufficiently mature, intellectually open and have a direct contact with the realities of life.

So one keeps asking is Ben a hero or a lost soul? One cannot doubt Ben's intellectual prowess since he attained a highly respectable profession as an engineer within the aeronautic industry. Whenever individuals fail to exert a neat balance between work and non work commitments, they will unnecessarily complicate life to the point of being driven to the very edge of a tragedy. From a philosophical perspective, one can safely argue that Ben through the intended suicide sought to escape from his torment via the easiest path. However in practice the easiest path does not mean it is justified in moral terms. Ben's actions generate a wide spectrum of perspectives from the members of the civil public. Ben in granting his personal life support organs as part of a retribution process so as to make for

seven deaths which he directly yet unconsciously caused. There is the background echoing of the seven pounds of flesh in Shakespeare Merchant of Venice, reflecting clearly that the viscous cycle of evil is constantly taking place throughout history.

## **The Self Giving of Vital Organs**

A highly insightful approach has been adopted by Paul Ramsey, who advocated initially that it is imperative that one focuses on the past Roman Catholic moral theology. The debate encompassing protagonist Christian moralists pivots around the central principle of “Totality”, specifically between a justifiable and unjustifiable “mutilation”. The latter is also related to the intrusion within a person’s bodily “integrity”. As already highlighted humankind enjoys the power but this does not imply that he enjoys the right to manipulate any part of his own body. We enjoy full stewardship, as administrators of our own body. This represents the appropriate act of administration, so as to ensure a holistic bodily life, where health is a cardinal principle.

A part of the human body such as individual limbs, organs, or functions are directly linked to a man’s bodily life within the health dimension. There is a direct relationship between the parts and the whole. Although these may be taken away, their functions will be permanently denatured, whenever this is beneficial for the holistic good. In this respect the principle of proportionality plays a pivotal role. Man can be considered as a “whole” enjoying a high level of dignity, within the context of social “wholes” to which he pertains. At this point the principle of totality comes into the forepart. Although the principle of totality conditions “self mutilation for one’s own good”, however

it does not influence self /mutilation for the case of one's neighbor. From a subjective perspective, does this militate against the good neighbor policy? Every case needs to be assessed on the basis of its merits. On the same lines of thought, the judgment that the self/giving of organs is not morally accepted on the grounds of the principle of totality does not constitute a minor reflection, or alternatively one the devoid of its core substance so as to attain more meaningful goals .