

The Ethics of Groundhog Day: Phil Connors and the Platonic Tripartite Division of the Soul

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In the film *Groundhog Day*, the character of Phil Connors is forced to relive the same day, February 2, over and over again. The choices that he makes while trapped in this time warp clearly depict the moral choices reflected in Plato's tripartite division of the soul. In the beginning of Phil's journey, his concerns are purely appetitive; however, by the end of his journey, he has reached the upper level that is philosophical.

Plato wrote in the *Republic* that the human soul is divided into three sections; the section to which a man subscribed the majority of his time and his attention determined what type of a man he was. Plato believed "the three classes of men included the philosophic, the ambitious, and finally, the lover of gain" (40). This concept became known as Plato's tripartite division of the soul (40). In his article entitled "Plato and the Tripartite Soul," J. L. Stocks says Plato's belief was that "the wisest are not really wise but only seekers after wisdom¹." Whether or not this is true, when the story begins, Phil is not seeking any type of wisdom.

In the *Republic*, Plato writes that the "most powerful characteristic [is] 'appetite,' because of the intensity of all the appetites with eating and drinking and sex and so on" (40). Early in the movie, Phil Connors, not only by his actions but also by the way that people react to him, emerges as an egotistical, self-righteous man whose sole focus in life is himself. He is thus engrossed in the fulfillment of his various sensual appetites.

As Plato would say, at this point, Phil seems to have never "looked into the upper

¹ J. L. Stocks, "Plato and the Tripartite Soul," *Mind* 24 (1915): 207-221.

region," that is, sought knowledge as a philosopher (43). Phil's position as a weatherman for a local channel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, however, suggests that at some point in his life, he had reached what Plato referred to as the "center region" or the "glory-seeking level," because he had attained a high-status job (43). Nevertheless, he chose subsequently to become incontinent, a choice Plato believed existed, and returned to his appetitive level (43). Throughout the film, Phil actually fluctuates between being appetitive and being ambitious before finally, after thousands of Groundhog Days, becoming philosophical.

Realizing that he is trapped in this time warp, he initially chooses to look at his situation as a curse and he does not try to find any good, let alone "the Good," coming from this nightmare (43). In short, he possesses a deontological outlook on life. He takes each action at face value which explains why he does not consider whether or not devouring gluttonous foods will help him attain the Good, which Plato believed to be knowledge, or if over-drinking and romancing strangers will make him more philosophical (44). He drinks alcohol with two locals and, after knocking over a mailbox, has a car chase with the police simply because by the very next morning, it will be as if nothing has ever happened. He also steals money from a local armored vehicle and manipulates unsuspecting women like Nancy Taylor, the woman whom he pretended to know from high school and whom he had supposedly always loved, to seduce them. These episodes do amuse him for a while, but they produce in him a shallow, empty happiness because "[a person] can never satisfy with unreal nourishment that part of [himself] which is itself unreal and incapable of lasting satisfaction" (44).

It is only after he becomes tired of these trivial conquests that he becomes ambitious and decides to devote what, in reality, could possibly have been months to the only woman in whom he is truly interested, his producer Rita. He decides to attempt to become the focus of her

affections. Phil's newfound quest makes him feel better than his previous dalliances because he believes that he has "looked upward" and reached that "upper region" (43).

In his desire to win Rita's heart, he spends time meticulously developing an inventory of her likes and her dislikes. He learns that in college she studied nineteenth-century French poetry, a particular passion of hers. It is unclear how long it takes him, but Phil learns enough about the French language to read and to recite French poetry to Rita. Although learning nineteenth-century French poetry is knowledge, it is not the type of knowledge a philosopher would learn because Phil only learns it for the sake of winning Rita's affection.

When he finally nears the point of earning Rita's love and trust on that fateful Groundhog Day evening, he spirals downward by his primitive, gain-seeking desire for sex and attempts to seduce her, thus ruining his chances. It is not until after losing his opportunity several more times that he gives up and asks Rita for her opinion on his plight. It is at this moment that she enlightens him by simply suggesting, "Maybe [the repetitive experience] is not a curse-it just depends on how you look at it."

Once he changes his outlook on the situation, he is able to transform slowly into a philosophical person, a transformation that Plato said very few people ever achieve (43). He is no longer deontological, but now teleological, searching for the Good. He starts to enjoy each moment of his ever-recurring day. He begins to read for the sake of knowledge and enjoyment instead of for some conniving exploitation he has planned. He chooses to start taking piano lessons for the simple pleasure of learning it. He even, on one fine Groundhog Day, decides to learn how to sculpt ice.

He discovers that he can truly enjoy each day, even if it is the same one. He finally appreciates his job, which is apparent during a particularly poignant speech that he gives on the

meaning of Groundhog Day. This speech deeply touches every member of the small town that he has, until this point, always despised. He finally decides to use this gift to expand his knowledge and to help others. He learns the Heimlich maneuver in order to save the mayor from choking. He researches human anatomy to help an elderly man whose back gives out. When he discovers that a local boy fell out of a tree and seriously hurt himself on Groundhog Day, he learns when and where this happens in order to prevent it from ever recurring. He also learns about fixing flat tires and helps a group of elderly women whose tire has gone flat. All of these actions are accomplished by Phil's ability to use his newly acquired knowledge in order to help others. This scenario is very similar to the one of the prisoner mentioned in Plato's famous "Myth of the Cave" speech in the *Republic* where the man who had been in chains in the darkness for all of his life was forced to experience reality and literally sees the light for the first time. He is so happy by all that he sees that he wants to help others reach that level, too (53).

Phil visually displays his newfound knowledge in three main episodes. The first is shown in his ice sculpture of an angel. While this scene is very brief, it is obvious by the reactions of Rita, Larry, and the other spectators that his work has touched them deeply. The second is his newly acquired ability to play the piano. He does not keep his knowledge to himself, but instead, shares it with everyone at a local dance. The former Phil would have not been ambitious enough to attempt this, and if he had been, he would have only done it for his personal glory. The final scene in which Phil visually displays his knowledge is in his genuine love for Rita. Phil starts off as such a shallow character that it takes a complete transformation for him to look beyond his own physical desires to see a good that is intellectual and beyond one's sensual appetites.

Phil Connors journey through Plato's tripartite division of the soul could realistically never occur by his reliving the same day over and over again. Nonetheless, it is an excellent

example of how most people will go through life never looking beyond themselves for a higher good; most people are satisfied to live life as appetitive individuals. However, after being forced out of his darkness and into the light, Phil understands and appreciates the true good in life. He desires to learn more, not only to improve his life but to help others, too. It just goes to show, as the old saying goes, that no matter how bad a situation may seem, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

References

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