

## **A Chance to Live Forever? Cloning and Personal Survival in *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day***

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws some generalising conclusions from the conceptions of death and personal identity that underlie the Hollywood blockbuster *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* (2000). It focusses on the villain's highly conspicuous indifference towards his own violent demise. This indifference, as the film makes clear, is due to his pre-arranged physical and mental duplication and revival, which in turn, like the plot of the entire movie, is based on the assumed feasibility of human cloning. Before this science-fictional background, I will approach the villain's attitude philosophically.

More precisely, I will approach it in terms of Derek Parfit's influential comments on questions of death and personal identity. In addition, there is a more broadly sociological dimension to the death-defying indifference of the villain, who clearly represents the latest type of the IT and media-savvy corporate wiz-kid. Perhaps, as I will argue in the final part of my discussion, which also briefly touches on the filmic medium of *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day*, the film makers' thanatological decisions and the largely absent critical response to them in contemporary reviews of the film indicate a shift of popular intuitions with regard to death that can be meaningfully described as post-modern.

### **Keywords**

Cloning, Death, Survival, Personal Identity, Hollywood, Parfit, Postmodernism.

For reasons I don't need to expand on here, Hollywood blockbusters are unlikely to offend any deeply held beliefs of their targeted mass audiences. This might have many aesthetic disadvantages, but also makes them more broadly representative of Western consumer culture than perhaps any other medium of fictional entertainment. Produced by, and starring, the then aspiring actor-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, the science-fiction action thriller *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* is no exception in this regard.<sup>1</sup> But what - you might wonder - has this movie to do with our conference topic? In what way can it help us make sense of death and dying? After all, when the film was first released in 2000, it claimed contemporary relevance mainly for its concern with genetic engineering. The title of *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* constitutes a direct

biblical reference to the book of *Genesis*<sup>2</sup> which appeared on advertising posters and is spelled out several times during the film: "On the sixth day, God created man." If anything, this quotation leads us to expect a questioning of scientists' right to tamper with natural forms of reproduction - along similar lines as in the slightly earlier *Gattaca*, for example, of 1997. As it turns out, however, *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* takes a different direction. Even though the broader nature-vs.-science debate is indeed repeatedly touched on in the film, the selective modification of DNA plays only a minor role. In the opening credits, the movie's central science-fictional premise is presented as in a line with the famous real-life "Dolly, the sheep" and the successful completion of the human genome project. Yet, as the viewer soon realises, genetic cloning as such forms only part of a more complex technology, a technology that allows for the replication not just of cell structures, but of entire individuals.

In order to make plausible the replication of human individuals, the film presupposes, first of all, that it's possible to create an identical copy of a particular human body. This is where genetic cloning comes in, combined with, less conspicuously, accelerated cell growth and surgery. Physical replication, however, is only half the job. In addition, secondly, the individual's psychological make-up and experiential knowledge need to be reproduced, which in practice means his or her memories. In this regard, the film further presupposes the feasibility of complete and accurate brain scans, whose results can be stored and subsequently superimposed on the "blank" brains of the physical duplicates. It's thus the combination of physical and psychological replication in the film that allows for the possibility of human cloning - of human cloning in a broader and at the same time more rigorous sense than usual, namely not just of cell clusters, bodies, or foetuses, but of full-grown individuals with their own mental histories.

Now, what makes this fictional technology relevant to our topic of death and dying is the way it's employed by the master villain who controls it in the film. For this villain - his name is Michael Drucker - isn't interested in duplicating individuals *per se*. Instead, he uses his technology for financially lucrative post-mortem resuscitations. Basically, as we learn in the course of the movie, Drucker grows and stores embryonic clones of people, has regular snapshots of their memories taken, and, in case they should die for one reason or another, "revives" them by way of combining their physical back-up copies with their psychological ones, by creating and animating full-grown replicas of them, who can then continue to live their lives as if these had never been interrupted. In a way, as Drucker puts it towards the end of the film, he offers people "the chance to live forever" - or does he?

In fact, as some of you may have noticed already, the survival through cloning promoted by Drucker depends on assumptions that aren't necessarily shared by most people. And I don't mean those regarding technological feasibility. The most interesting issues in the plot of *The 6<sup>th</sup>*

*Day* are actually philosophical rather than technological, and they pose a serious challenge to traditional conceptions of personal identity. Is being replaced by a physical and psychological replica of oneself really the same as personal survival? And, if not, is such a replacement as good as personal survival or should it be feared like death? These questions aren't easy to answer, even though Drucker seems anything but doubtful. His reaction, near the end of the film, to being shot through the stomach in his own clone factory clearly reveals his philosophical commitment. "I'll be dead in twenty minutes, tops," he predicts coolly, before hinting at the reason for his coolness: "But what better place, right?" Entirely unperturbed by the prospect of reincarnation, Drucker only panics when Schwarzenegger's character starts to destroy the entire cloning facility. In his eyes, obviously, being replaced by a physical and mental duplicate counts pretty much as ordinary survival.

As some of you might know from the occasional news headline, there's currently a real-life cult movement, the Raëlians, whose vision of personal afterlife resembles in many respects Drucker's survival by cloning. Yet since their reflections are at best superficial and at worst delusional - you can find them on the internet if you're interested - I'll quickly move on to a much more thoroughly argued contribution to the subject: Derek Parfit's 1984 study *Reasons and Persons*.<sup>3</sup> Parfit argues, as the philosophers among you might know, for a morally significant change in our attitude towards personal identity, and his argument takes frequent recourse to imagined scenarios of death and survival. As it happens, Drucker's survival-through-cloning technique mirrors in all essential points Parfit's teleportation scenario, in which the philosopher imagines himself being destroyed and fully recreated elsewhere on the basis of a transmitted blueprint.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Parfit's position as to personal survival in this process seems quite compatible with Drucker's beliefs about cloning. Unlike the movie character, naturally, the philosopher spells out both his reasons and the wider implications of his views outside the realm of science fiction. Yet since we don't have time to rehearse either - they amount to a good 150 pages of painstaking explication in Parfit's book - let's simply stick to his basic claims here.

With regard to persons, firstly, Parfit argues for what he calls the reductionist view, which maintains that "a person's existence just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events."<sup>5</sup> This definition would be readily accepted by Drucker since, just like him, it doesn't discriminate between clones and their originals. By contrast, Parfit's definition somewhat jars with the outlaw-status of human clones in the film world as well as with Drucker's opponents' marked concern about "the soul" and the direct involvement of God in people's creation - about an additional component of personhood, in

other words, that is separate from and irreducible to those listed by Parfit. The various non-reductionist alternatives to Drucker's position in the film are revealing as to their surprisingly blatant inconsistencies, which riddle even the views of the Schwarzenegger character and heroic everyman whom the viewer is supposed to identify with. But since there's no time to discuss them in detail in this talk, let's move on to how, secondly, Drucker conceptualises personal identity.

A person continues to exist, according to Parfit, if and only if a) there's psychological continuity, b) this continuity hasn't taken a branching form, and c) it has the right kind of cause.<sup>6</sup> Considering these criteria one by one and applying them to a clone successfully assembled by Drucker, we find that the criterion of psychological continuity, a), is quite naturally met by the complete transfer of memories to the clone and thus unproblematic. The non-branch-line criterion, b), is met whenever the original human does not survive together with its duplicate - for example when Drucker resurrects his thoroughly exterminated henchmen. Yet while branching lives are by no means part of Drucker's plan, they can and do happen by accident, namely in Gibson's as well as Drucker's own case. This means that, according to Parfit, Gibson and Drucker are no longer numerically identical with themselves after their cloning and thus no longer the same persons. Whereas Gibson learns about his duplication after the fact and hence cannot react to the prospect of it, Drucker initiates his with perfect equanimity and thus qualifies once more as a Parfitian.<sup>7</sup> For as will be clear from Parfit's next major claim, there is no need for him to anticipate the ensuing loss of personal identity with dread. But before moving on to this claim, we still need to consider c), the right kind of cause.

The term "right" calls for further specification, of course, but here Parfit remains deliberately undecided. The normal cause of psychological continuity would be physical continuity - most importantly of our brains - and if we insist on this narrow criterion, no clone of ours can, strictly speaking, be described as us. If, however, we regard as the right kind of cause not just the normal but any, or at least any reliable, cause of psychological continuity, the very same cloning event can also be described as an instance of personal survival. Judging by the way Drucker speaks about his resurrections (which might of course always be loosely metaphorical or strategically motivated), he seems to lean towards the broader understanding of "right" and therefore regard himself and his clients as actually surviving. But even if he doesn't, this won't put him at odds with Parfit, according to whom there's little to choose from between these different positions. Complete replication, Parfit argues, would in any case be "as good as" ordinary survival, even if we don't call it that.<sup>8</sup>

Like Drucker's equanimity towards breaking the non-branch-line clause, this last point is linked to the third major claim of Parfit's that needs

to be discussed here. This claim is a valuation. As Parfit demonstrates in much detail, the relation that matters both morally and rationally isn't actually our traditional and linguistically entrenched concept of personal identity with the already mentioned criteria a), b), and c). Instead, the relation we have reason to care about is psychological continuity with any cause - a difference whose full realisation can profoundly affect our thinking about death, our future, and ethics more generally, even though in our everyday lives the two relations usually hold together. So, to sum up, and answer our guiding questions: according to Parfit, being replaced by a clone might or might not be the same as personal survival - depending ultimately on our linguistic preferences. It is, however, in any case as good as personal survival, which is all that matters in Parfit's eyes. Drucker's behaviour in the film is largely compatible with this position. Using the language of personal identity and perhaps initially convinced of the identity-preserving nature of his resurrection method, he still doesn't flinch when his own identity is about to break down through temporary co-existence with his own clone. From this moment at the latest, it's quite obviously merely the preservation of psychological continuity that matters to him. Despite a few justified lapses, Drucker's general attitude towards cloning is supported by Parfit's study and thus to an impressive extent rational and consistent.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the relative rationality and consistency of a position by no means guarantees its widespread acceptance by filmmakers and audiences. The persuasive powers of these qualities might well be outweighed by problems of understanding, religious faith, habit, personal dislike, cultural politics, etc. As Parfit himself says about his views,

the truth is very different from what we are inclined to believe. Even if we are not aware of this, most of us are Non-Reductionists. If we considered my imagined cases, we would be strongly inclined to believe that our continued existence is a deep further fact, distinct from physical and psychological continuity, and a fact that must be all-or-nothing. This is not true.<sup>10</sup>

Parfit wrote this assessment of popular opinion in the early 1980s. What - I'd finally like to ask in this paper - does the way in which Drucker is characterised in *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* tell us about its ongoing validity?

First of all, there's no denying that, overall, the movie confirms Parfit's assessment. For even though, on the level of argument, Drucker's Parfitian views are never properly challenged by his less articulate opponents, they are still continually and systematically tainted through their association with his character.<sup>11</sup> This character is clearly demarcated as evil, of course, by his various criminal activities, which, apart from cloning

humans, include bribery, kidnapping, blackmail, and several cold-blooded murders. Furthermore, over and above the generic traits of the Hollywood corporate “baddie,” the filmmakers have given Drucker a distinctive set of qualities that also turn him into a well-known cultural type. These qualities emerge most clearly when contrasted with their counterparts in the character of Adam Gibson, the hero we’re supposed to sympathise with.

Whereas the sturdy, middle-aged Gibson is characterised as conservative and “old-fashioned” from the beginning, the youngish, more dynamic Drucker appears thoroughly progressive and fashionable. They might both embrace modern technology, but while for Gibson this means controlling mechanical hardware - planes, cars, power tools, and the like - Drucker surrounds himself with the latest in digital communication equipment and simulations such as holograms or computer generated oil paintings. In addition, of course, there’s Drucker’s wholesale commitment to high-tech biotechnology, a pursuit that starkly contrasts with Gibsons’ school-boyish testing of explosive chemicals near the middle of the film. Here, especially, Gibson appears nostalgically stuck in the past compared to Drucker, who on his part has clearly internalised the late twentieth-century shift in dominance from the physical to the life and information sciences.<sup>12</sup>

The culturo-historical opposition between the two characters is also established through their private lives. That Gibson’s conforms to the American ideal of the traditional nuclear family is hammered home by *cliché* after *cliché*: there are the bedroom scenes and flirtatious bickerings between a husband and wife still as much in love as ever, the surprise birthday party complete with neighbours and friends, the tragic death of the much-loved family pet, the cute little daughter and her school recital, and the final family hug with conspicuously displayed wedding band. Drucker’s private life, by contrast, is conspicuous by its absence. His sexual inclinations remain unspecified, though certain scenes and jokes about him and his clone hint at homosexuality and an extreme auto-eroticism, both diametrically opposed, of course, to Gibson’s blatant heterosexuality.

Besides these uncertainties and suspicions of unconventionality, the fact that we see Drucker almost exclusively within public or professional settings is likely to colour our thinking about the things he says. When Adam Gibson speaks his relatively simple mind to his friends, family, and even enemies, it never clashes with what we’ve seen or heard in the movie. Not least because of Schwarzenegger’s vocal and facial limitations, we barely think him capable of anything but authenticity. Drucker, however, is presented from the outset as a consummate rhetorician and manipulator of language, who has evidently no qualms about adapting his professed beliefs to whatever will help his immediate cause. This sort of pragmatic flexibility naturally distracts from the intrinsic merits his various claims may have - including his Parfitian attitude towards personal survival. Furthermore,

though, it, like all the attributes I've mentioned so far and more, is highly symptomatic of the much-debated cultural phase or phenomenon that we know as postmodernity.

Famously celebrating hybridity, virtuality, pragmatism, rhetoricity, the breakdown of clear-cut distinctions, and surfaces without deep realities underneath, postmodernism in general is demonised in *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* as the cultural provenance of the chief villain Drucker, who, at the end of the film, dies in the form of an unfinished, nightmarish-looking clone breaking through the glass roof of a futuristic skyscraper. Drucker's Parfitian attitude towards personal survival can be seen as included in this cultural criticism - by their association in the movie but also since there are indeed some points of contact between it and postmodernism. Contrary to postmodernist practice, Parfit unhesitatingly bases his claims on the authority of rational argument and truth. Yet his devaluation of personal identity as the concept that matters in questions of death and survival shows nonetheless some similarities to what postmodernists say on the subject. Consider, for example, the postmodernist conception of personal identity as described by the theorist Seyla Benhabib:

The subject is replaced by a system of structures, oppositions and différences which, to be intelligible, need not be viewed as products of a living subjectivity at all. You and I are the mere "sites" of such conflicting languages of power, and "the self" is merely another position in language.<sup>13</sup>

Using a different terminology than Parfit, and a different theoretical background, the postmodernist view still resembles the philosopher's conclusions at least superficially in that, like them, it reduces personal identity to a merely linguistic entity, as opposed to a separately existing further fact.

If, in *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day*, Parfit's philosophical views are implicitly linked to postmodernism as a whole, this might have an effect on their acceptance by viewers. There'll always be those in the audience who resist Schwarzenegger's Republican agenda of establishing - and associating with himself - the nostalgic myth of a natural, authentic, family-friendly, and God-given modernity that needs to be protected from the artificial, glibly persuasive, ego-centred, and blasphemous trends of contemporary science and culture. The occasional complaints by reviewers about the sentimental and domestic scenes in the movie might be indications of such resistance.<sup>14</sup> As might be the general lack of criticism regarding Drucker's belief in survival by cloning.<sup>15</sup> If we were indeed as strongly inclined against Parfit's reductionist view as he suspected in the 1980s, wouldn't we consider Drucker's indifference to his own death followed by cloning utterly

unrealistic or misguided? The fact that we don't shows an increasing openness towards Parfit's stance that alienates us from the hero of the film and its general philosophical message. Of course, this isn't necessarily due to philosophical arguments. Our habitual intuitions regarding personal identity might be gradually weakening due to our constant handling of virtual objects on the internet. And there's not least the filmic medium of *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day*, where personal identity is established visually and orally, and one and the same actor plays a whole series of consecutive clones. Rationally speaking, this shouldn't affect our belief in their identity, of course, but subliminally it almost certainly does. From all this and my own discussions with fellow cinemagoers, I'd personally conclude that there might at least be the chance that, in *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day*, the anti-Parfitian Schwarzenegger is fighting a rearguard action.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> R. Spottiswoode, dir., *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day*, Columbia Pictures, 2000. Quotations are from the DVD version and referenced throughout in hours, minutes, and seconds separated by colons. That *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* constitutes indeed a successful blockbuster can be gathered from the Worldwide Box Office Grosses archives ([www.boxofficeguru.com/intlarch1.htm](http://www.boxofficeguru.com/intlarch1.htm)), according to which it had already generated \$101.5m by January 31, 2001 (34% of which came from the US and Canada and 66% from other countries). This number obviously excludes later DVD, VHS, and TV sales.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis*, 1: 27-31.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Part Three: Personal Identity', in D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Drucker's earlier comment on the duplicated Gibson's "unique perspective" might even suggest that he appreciates the philosophical import of his state.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Parfit, *op. cit.*, p. 208f.

<sup>9</sup> Considerably more so, by the way, than that of the Raëlians. Failing to adopt Parfit's devaluation of personal identity in favour of mere psychological continuity, their vision of immortality is vulnerable to several strong philosophical objections.

<sup>10</sup> Parfit, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

<sup>11</sup> Both of these claims can be supported by evidence from the film, though there is no time/space to provide this here.



<sup>12</sup> Information technology has become famously integral to the probability-based life sciences. As to the latter's dominance: according to a leading article in *Nature* titled 'Biology versus Physics' (vol. 391, January 1998, p. 107), "there is a tendency for biology to dominate perceptions of science at the expense of support for other disciplines. [...] From their dominant positions at the heart of the science-industrial-government corpus during the middle decades of this century, physicists are now reduced to justifying their continuing existence on the coat-tails of another discipline." This opinion piece also refers to a "recent assertion of President Bill Clinton to the effect that the past 50 years have been the age of physics, whereas the next will be 'very likely characterized predominantly as the age of biology'."

<sup>13</sup> From S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge, 1992, p. 209. Cf. also C. Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, J. Lieberman's 2006 article on *Ruthless Reviews* ([www.ruthlessreviews.com/reviews.cfm/id/630/page/the\\_\\_th\\_day.htm](http://www.ruthlessreviews.com/reviews.cfm/id/630/page/the__th_day.htm) 1) or Michael Atkinson's "Past Action Heroes; Insane Clone Posses" on *The Village Voice* (November 2000; [www.villagevoice.com/film/0047\\_atkinson\\_1999720.html](http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0047_atkinson_1999720.html)).

<sup>15</sup> Tor Thorsen's review on *Reel.com* even describes Drucker as "a villain with pretty convincing pro-cloning arguments" (<http://www.reel.com/movie.asp?MID=131322&buy=open&Tab=reviews&CID=13#tabs>) and Paul Malcolm's on *LA Weekly* points out the movie's "inability to muster an even remotely convincing argument against human cloning" ('Total Rehash: Cloning Arnold Schwarzenegger', November 2000; [www.laweekly.com/film+tv/film/total-rehash/5268/](http://www.laweekly.com/film+tv/film/total-rehash/5268/)).

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