**The Bourne Legacy and Scientism: The interplay between morality and science [Spoiler]**

**By the Rev. James Coleman**

The 2012 film the Bourne Legacy is full of fast paced action but it also contains some interesting insights into the interplay between morality and science. The reason science comes up in the movie is because the central character Aaron Cross, played by Jeremy Renner is part of a secret military drug trial to engineer super soldiers. Cross has to take a blue pill, which provides cognitive enhancement and a green one that provides physical enhancement.

The other main character is military scientist Dr Marta Shearing played by Rachel Weisz. She is part of the scientific team that has developed these drugs. There is a scene part way through the movie where Aaron Cross is discussing the Dr Marta Shearing’s work. The discussion occurs in response to a scene where a fellow military scientist guns down his co-workers in a Newtown style massacre in the lab.

It becomes clear in the discussion that military scientists have developed drugs that enable them to programme a human to do certain things like kill people. The manipulation emerges as the cause of the massacre in the lab.

While Aaron Cross is clearly troubled by the moral implications of Dr Marta Shearing’s work she seeks to distance herself from any moral responsibility for what has happened. She says that she just designs the drugs and the delivery systems. She seeks to play the victim saying that she has had to give up publishing in scientific journals and any public profile so as to pursue the greatest advances in her field of science. She seeks to wash her hands of the implications of her work saying that it was not as if she actually pulled the trigger. The script also appeals to utilitarian justifications for her actions by implying that Cross is smarter as a consequence of her work and that that is a good and justifiable outcome of her work.

One implicit assumption behind her initial reasoning is that scientific knowledge must be pursued at all costs. In some ways this reasoning is a form of scientism. Scientism is the word view that the only things that are real, and knowable and true is science and what science pronounces upon. The ideology of scientism is pithily summarised in the quote below from Nicholas Rescher in *The Limits of Science* where he says:

*“The theorist who maintains that science is the be-all and end-all- that what is not in science textbooks is not worth knowing- is an ideologist with a particular and distorted doctrine of his [or her] own. For him [or her] science is no longer a sector of the cognitive enterprise but an all-inclusive world view. This is the doctrine not of science but of scientism. To take this stance is not to celebrate science but to distort it.[[1]](#footnote-1)”*

The drama in the Bourne Legacy is a good illustration of the danger and blindness of a worldview that sees the world of science is the only repository of knowledge. It is a good illustration because it sharply contrasts scientism with morality. Morality is one of many other branches of knowledge that stand outside of science and comments on science. The projects that Dr Shearing was working on were deeply immoral. The character Aaron Cross knew that and any person who watches the film knows it too. But how does one articulate why it is morally wrong. What is morality any way for that matter?

It is true that it is difficult to define morality or meta-ethics in an air tight manner. Notwithstanding that there are some key conditions that can be identified for something to be seen as a moral principle. The ingredients or characteristics of a moral principle are: a judgment which is accepted as supremely authoritative in guiding actions, motives and attitudes in a universal sense.[[2]](#footnote-2) It must include a prescriptive imperative. By that it is meant that it contains or implies an “ought” statement. Finally it must make reference to proper human flourishing and dignity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

An example of the universal sense attached to moral principles is our reaction to Nazi Germany. We all see the mass killings of innocents, which occurred in Nazi Germany as morally wrong- as evil. We see killing innocents as universally morally wrong, which we take to mean wrong irrespective of one’s race, culture or gender etc. In that context we make moral judgements which we consider to be universally true.

Christian’s see moral values as existing objectively irrespectively of one’s race, culture, gender or economic circumstances and religion. They exist irrespective of whether a person or a culture accepts them or acknowledges them. The objective existence of morality and moral principles is rooted in the holiness of God. Christians also consider that one can reason to justify or arrive at a moral statement and most importantly that one’s life is to be guided by and lived in a morally rational and responsible way even if making a morally correct decision is not in one’s immediate best interests. An example of this might be refusing to make a bribe to get a contract.

Jesus makes it clear that if one is to follow him one must live an ethical life in his famous Sermon on the Mount speech.[[4]](#footnote-4) The key theme of that speech was to articulate what love looks like in action.

It is the Christian belief in the existence of objective moral principles and the ability to reason morally, which clashes with some aspects of popular secular culture. For example a popular, contemporary moral principal is the idea of tolerance. In this regard it is fascinating that what modern secular culture means by tolerance is not the classical meaning of tolerance.

The classical Christian meaning is that while two people may fundamentally disagree as to whether x is morally right or wrong they will nonetheless respect the person, love the person and seek their best despite holding the view that on point x they are wrong. This sense of meaning assumes that one can reason morally to an objectively correct moral conclusion and that moral conclusions are rationally formed and held and hence can be wrong or in error. A moral disagreement in this sense is that two people disagree over whether a statement like x is wrong is true or not.

The fashionable secular meaning of tolerance is, however, different. It does not mean that two different moral judgments should be tolerated but rather that a person should not make a judgment as to whether something is morally right or wrong in the first place. That is – any moral judgment should be suspended.

It is for this reason that if a person is to say x is right or y is wrong they are said to be judgmental. They have made a moral judgment. It is precisely the imperative not to make a judgment (and hence reason morally) that makes some people get frustrated with what they call political correctness. They feel trapped by this strong cultural expectation that they must not reason morally. It is why you will sometimes hear people express their frustration by saying that political correctness makes them feel as if their brains have fallen out. It is the societal denial of the ability to reason morally in public that makes people use language like that about their “brains having fallen out”.

The resolution of the drama in The Bourne Legacy is that the characters Aaron Cross and Dr Shearing escape the controlling presence of the United States government. The United States government is portrayed as immoral to the core in that it has both devised the scientific work in question and at the same time is seeking to kill those involved so as to cover its shame. Their freedom is the freedom from control and evidence by them sailing away into the sunset in a country far from the United States.

In the real world, one escape from the mental control of the dominant culture is Christ and the Church. There you will be free to think and reason without the dominant cultural control of your thought processes. Aaron Cross was a radical in the movie. He stepped outside of his immediate military culture. You too can be a radical with Christ by stepping outside of the dominate culture surrounding you.

1. Quoted from Miller and Craig *The….* Page 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a paraphrase of Craig page 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is a paraphrase of Craig page 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mathew chapters 5 to 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)