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Seven Pounds

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Abstract

This is a review of *Seven Pounds* (2008).

Life brings death; death brings life. When reduced to a pithy statement, this central theme of Director Gabriele Muccino's *7 Pounds* sounds like a simple one with no depth. However, when one begins to build around it with the brick and mortar of the film's plot, the statement shows itself to be not only complicated, but also the source of religious dialogue.

Seven (7) Pounds focuses on Ben Thomas (Will Smith), an IRS agent who uses his job for an abstruse plan to change the lives of seven strangers. Ben is excessively driven, constantly meeting with his friend and reminding him to "stick to the plan." But Ben becomes tortured when he falls in love with Emily (Rosario Dawson), a young lady with a heart condition. A flashback reveals that his wife and six other people were killed when the car he was driving veered into oncoming traffic. It is clear that his guilt gives him a duty to somehow make things right. This duty both drives Ben's plan forward and prevents him from allowing love or happiness to have any place in his life.

The film culminates as Emily's condition declines to imminent death. At this point, Ben's plan is revealed. He calls 911 and states that he would like to report a suicide...his own suicide. Soon after, Emily is notified that a heart has just become available for transplant. As an immediate result of his death, Ben gifts to Emily a working heart and to a blind man a new set of eyes. Soon after the

transplant, she discovers the ultimate effect of Ben's death: with his death, he has positively affected seven lives as an act of atonement for the seven lives he took.

The immediate benefactors of Ben's suicide are Emily and the blind man. The other five people who benefit from Ben's calculated self-destruction receive their respective donations over the time period from the tragic car accident to his final death. To his brother he gave a lung; a hockey coach received a kidney; a social worker was given part of his liver; to a young boy he gave some of his bone marrow; and to an abused mother and children, he endowed his home to serve as a safe haven.

Does *7 Pounds* offer a deplorable aggrandizement of suicide? Can suicide be viewed as a moral alternative to life? To answer these questions, *7 Pounds*, like most religious constructs, proffers its own perspective of morality within a normative system of ethics. Instead of taking the Catholic view of suicide as an unforgivable sin, the film offers a different explanation: suicide can be stripped of its negative connotations when paired with "self-sacrifice", a term burdened with positive connotations. Thus, Ben's suicide is seen as a moral, self-sacrificial act that becomes both the atoning end of his life and the beginning of 7 other lives. His death can then be called "beneficent suicide" – a suicide by which the net result is goodness.

With the idea of a net-positive suicide in mind, the motivation for the act should also be taken into consideration. In causing the death of seven people, Ben views himself as culpable, and seeks atonement for the accident. Thus, his “beneficent suicide” is driven by a selfish duty to “set things right,” as it were, by atoning for his own sins. This type self-sacrifice is unique: he sacrifices himself to save others, so that he himself may be saved. His motives cannot be said to be wholly pure, as we know the primary purpose of his plan is his duty to make things right, according to what he has done – to pay the debt, so to speak, of the deaths for which he was responsible. So one must weigh Ben’s actions against his deontology: does his penitent motivation to clear his conscience invalidate the good effects of his suicide?

Seven Pounds does what all good movies do: it gets people talking. It takes the tainted idea of suicide and looks at it in a different light. “What if,” the film asks, “there is a way to atone for one’s sins with suicide?” What if this act can do good? When viewed through a Christian theological lens, the answer to the question may be “yes.” This act of self-sacrificial, “beneficent suicide” is reminiscent perhaps of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ within the Christian tradition. Though rarely described as “suicide,” the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for the atonement and salvation – life – for those who believe in him is a noble one. One notable difference, of course, is that Jesus (unlike Ben) did not need to sacrifice himself to

atone for himself. Jesus' sacrifice was not for any selfish gain. The question remains, however: even with partial self-serving outcomes, can beneficent suicide be a morally acceptable action? Perhaps that is the type of re-envisaging of suicide that *7 Pounds* desires.