

Topical Film: The Adjustment Bureau

This film was made in 2011, starring Matt Damon and Emily Blunt. It tells the story of an ambitious American politician whose choices in life and love are manipulated by some mysterious agents, 'The Adjustment Bureau'.

The film is certificate 12. It raises questions about free will, human agency, God, omnipotence, omniscience and true love.

Below are some key questions to consider. Watch the film and try to answer the questions. On the next two pages you will find fascinating extra information and thoughtful reflections to help you think about these questions further. Read the pages and edit your answers in light of any new thoughts that you have.

A film blog... start here!

You may not be keen to write a load of essays, but how about starting a blog, talking about films you have watched, and commenting on the religious and philosophical questions that they raise?

Here are some questions to get you started when watching *The Adjustment Bureau*:

- Do we have free will?
- Does God know the future?
- Does God have a plan for people's lives?
- Why does Elise scare the Adjustment Bureau?
- Is love really all you need?

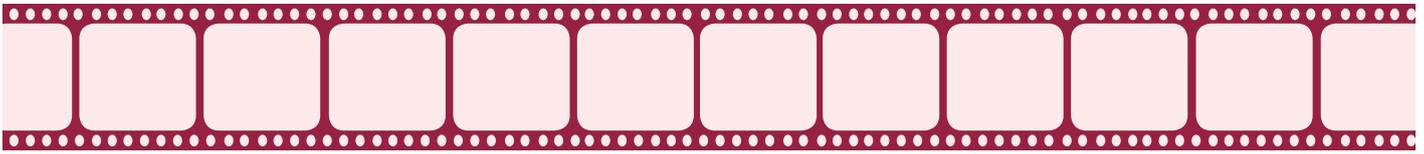
What other questions do you have? What other questions does the film raise for you?

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Topical film:

The Adjustment Bureau



Synopsis [contains spoilers!]

David Norris is an ambitious young politician running for a seat in the US Senate. On the night that newspaper revelations scupper his chances, he meets a beautiful and intriguing stranger, Elise. As he falls for her and seeks her out, he encounters some mysterious men who are intent on keeping them apart. He finds out that they are the Adjustment Bureau, agents of the Chairman (God? Fate?). The agents ensure that people follow a predetermined path in life – and for David this does not include Elise. But he has to decide whether to accept this and forget Elise, or defy God/Fate and set out his own path.

You might use *The Adjustment Bureau* to explore the following questions:



Do we have free will?

What do we mean by freedom? Do we have unfettered freedom or are we inevitably constrained by, for example, our responsibility to others, or the law? Are we free to choose to act, or is our path determined for us? Is this through physical causes – are our choices the result of a combination of external influences and brain chemicals? Or are our choices determined by some external Power?

Before he encounters the Adjustment Bureau 're-setting' his friend Charlie, David Norris doesn't know that his choices are influenced/ manipulated by the agents. If he does not know, does it matter? As senior agent Thompson says: 'You don't have free will, David – you have the appearance of free will.' Is the illusion of freedom sufficient, or do we demand something more? What difference would it make if we have the illusion of freedom, or if we are truly free?

To what extent do students feel that their own lives are mapped out, or are they free?

The Adjustment Bureau agents have books that reveal the possible future pathways of David and Elise. Note that these books contain the possible routes for David and Elise to choose. The agents' task is to influence decisions so that they follow the correct path at key moments. But it is not that David and Elise have paths like train tracks, from which they must not deviate. So are their lives determined by the Chairman and the Adjustment Bureau – or are they still free?

You might introduce the concepts of hard and soft determinism and libertarianism. It is worth exploring ideas of **liberty of spontaneity** (where we are free to act according to our nature, although our nature is determined by genetic and environmental factors like upbringing and education: e.g. in the way that a lion might be 'free' to be a carnivore – it can freely act according to its nature) and **liberty of indifference** (where we can act against our nature: e.g. a lion is 'free' to be a herbivore – in that it can choose to go against nature/upbringing. Clearly a lion cannot 'choose' in this way, but you get the point).

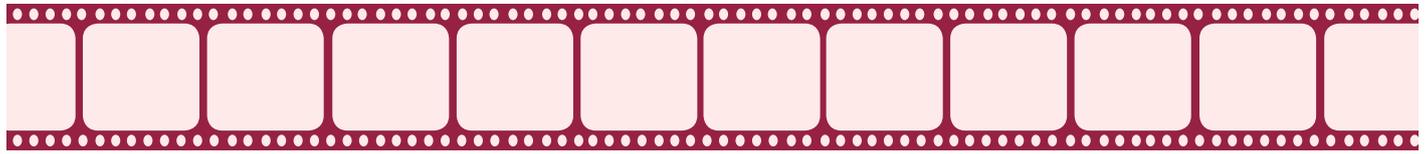


Does God know the future?

One philosophical problem for religious believers is the question of God's omniscience. Does God know everything? Then God must know the future – which makes us little more than automatons. If God doesn't know the future, he is not omniscient. Some say that God can only know what it is possible to know, i.e. not the future. Some suggest even if God does know the future, this knowledge is not causal. You might know someone so well you know what they will do next. But that doesn't mean that you cause them to act that way, or that they are not free to act.

This also raises a question about God's nature: is God timeless or everlasting? Does God see all of time at once – as someone at the top of a mountain can see the whole of the path along the mountainside below? Or is God everlasting, proceeding in time, and only able to see a certain distance ahead, like travellers on the mountain road? This does not stop God from having a destination (or 'Plan') and ensuring it is reached, but God does not write every action for all people.

The Adjustment Bureau's Planbook seems more like this – human beings have a form of free will. As the senior agent, Thompson, sneeringly says, 'You have free will over what tie to



pick in the morning, or what beverage to order at lunch. But humanity just isn't mature enough to have control over the important things.'

What difference might it make to believers if God is timeless or everlasting?

 **Does God have a plan for people's lives?**

Some Christians use Jeremiah 29:11 as a text to suggest that God has a plan for their lives, and that God wills whatever happens to them. This can be a comfort for some (it encourages trust in God through difficult times). Others may agonise over certain decisions they take rather than being confident in their freedom to choose, wondering what God's will is for them.

Not all Christians see this as the way God works. The word 'prosper' in Jeremiah 29:11 ('plans to prosper you') is *shalom*, which means 'peace' or 'wholeness'. The idea that God wants to bring people peace and wholeness sidesteps the issue about God determining the individual futures of all human beings. Some point out that the passage is addressed to Jeremiah as an individual and cannot be applied more widely.

 **What is the place of women?**

Is Elise a weak and helpless cipher, in need of a man to protect her? Or is she strong and powerful, mistress of her own destiny? She certainly scares the Adjustment Bureau! Is she an agent of misrule? Does she represent the chaotic spirit that stands against God, or is she the ideal of a person who takes her freedom seriously, along with responsibilities? Does Elise stand for a feminist perspective against patriarchal, hierarchical religion? To what extent do religions take women seriously?

 **Is love all you need?**

Is love the key force, the key motivator in the world? Is it love that overcomes the vagaries of Fate, or the machinations of God? The film suggests that love and the courage to 'do the right thing' are rare among humans. Many religious traditions emphasise the primacy of love – Christians talk about *agape* love – self-sacrificial love. David tries to sacrifice his love for Elise in order to protect her from harm. In the end, their love persuades the Chairman to change the Plan. Is love the most important value or virtue in the world? Why? Why not?

 **Some key texts**

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

Jeremiah 29:11, NIV

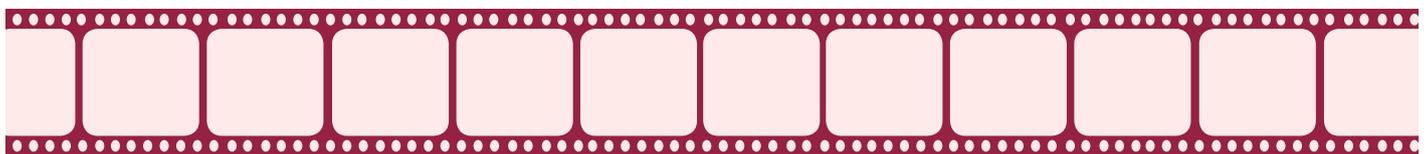
My frame was not hidden from you
When I was made in the secret place.
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

Psalms 139:15-16, NIV

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of one's house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

Song of Songs 8:6-7, NIV

What do these passages mean? What different interpretations are given of these texts? What impact might they have on the lives of religious believers?



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