



Doctor Who - Dilemmas of a Time Traveller

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Dilemmas of a time traveller

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Executive Producer: Russell T. Davies, Julie Gardner and Mal Young

Starring: David Tennant, Catherine Tate

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So *Doctor Who* is back on our screens again and already the series has raised a number of perplexing issues in the minds of avid viewers. How can Rose (Billie Piper) be back? What is happening to all these 'lost' planets? And why would the Doctor (David Tennant) throw a perfectly good sonic device in the bin? However, these are not the only questions raised by the episodes so far. The Doctor has run into some fairly serious moral dilemmas and has made some very interesting decisions, which are worth considering in more depth.

Episode two, 'The Fires of Pompeii', particularly caught my attention for its novel take on the famous eruption which buried the ancient Roman town under tons of ash. When the Doctor and Donna (Catherine Tate) arrive on the scene, they are initially unaware of the significance of the precise date and location in which they find themselves. By the time they have realised that it is 'volcano day', the Tardis has been sold as modern art by an enterprising street vendor and the two visitors have attracted the attention of a sinister prophetic cult. Going to retrieve the Tardis from the house of marble worker and social climber Lucius Caecilius Lucundus, the Doctor and Donna meet his family and argue about whether to warn the citizens of Pompeii of their impending doom. While the Doctor contends that the eruption is a 'fixed point in history' which he cannot change, Donna believes that they have a duty to try and save the people, even if they won't listen to her. Before they can resolve their debate, they are interrupted by some intriguing revelations from the local soothsayers.

The pair of time travellers soon discovers that not all is as it seems in this town, and when their meddling provokes the anger of 'the mountain gods' things start really hotting up. It turns out that an alien race, the Pyrovile, is living under Mount Vesuvius and planning to take over the bodies of the citizens of Pompeii, conquer the world, and destroy all human life. Suddenly the moral dilemma has changed. It is no longer a question of meddling with history, but a choice about who should live and who must die. Should the Doctor let the Pyrovile continue so that the volcano never erupts, but the earth is eventually destroyed? Or should he actively choose to trigger the eruption and kill all the townspeople in order to save the human race? The Doctor and Donna agree to blow up the volcano, risking their own lives to do so, but then find themselves faced with a final dilemma. Having doomed the people of Pompeii, should they try to rescue any of them from the fate to which history condemns them? The Doctor claims that it cannot be done, but Donna eventually persuades him to use the Tardis to bring Caecilius and his family to safety.

The specific dilemmas faced by the Doctor and Donna in Pompeii are not common problems in our lives. However, the way they approach these

moral decisions is relevant to any issue with an ethical dimension. The climax of the episode is the choice to sacrifice the people of Pompeii for the greater good of the world. While this is a painful decision, it is presented as the right action for the Doctor to take. He actively plays a role in ending the lives of thousands of people, as well as wiping out an alien race, based on the premise that it is better for this number of people to die than for many more to die in the future. It is difficult to see how the Doctor could choose anything other than this utilitarian course of action. Certainly, Donna concedes that there is no other way. However, the dilemma illustrates the difference between ethical decisions based on consequences and those based on a prior, principle-based evaluation of an action as intrinsically good or bad. Utilitarianism focuses on the end result, which means that you aim for the best outcome for the maximum number of people, and it is permissible to do bad things, like killing twenty-thousand people in this extreme example, in order to achieve that goal of the greater good. If the Doctor had based his decision on whether the action itself was intrinsically right or wrong, rather than their consequences, he would not have killed anyone and it is likely that this would have had grave repercussions in the future. However, since he did not do this, we can never be certain what would have happened. Perhaps the Doctor does know the exact results of all his possible actions, but for the rest of us, uncertainty about the outcome of our choices is a big problem if we are making ethical decisions based on their potential consequences. People who believe, as the Doctor does, that their own actions determine what will happen in the future, may well adopt a utilitarian approach to ethics, feeling compelled to do whatever it takes to achieve the best possible consequences. However, it is worth noting that the Doctor does sometimes base his actions on principles, rather than utilitarian concerns, as seen in his dealings with the Ood in episode 3, 'Planet of the Ood'. It is not clear how the Doctor decides when to act on principle and when to focus on consequences, but those who believe that a greater power than themselves or the Doctor is ultimately in control of history may feel that it is better to concentrate on doing good actions and trust that the future will proceed according to plan.

Having chosen to allow Pompeii to be destroyed,

the Doctor is reluctant to do any more damage by messing with history to save any of the townspeople: 'Don't you think I've done enough? History's back in place and everyone dies.' Donna is not satisfied by this response, however, and begs him to intervene: 'Just someone. Please. Not the whole town. Just save someone.' The decision to save the family who they have come to know is a very human response when faced with suffering on a large scale. The Doctor and Donna do not feel able to save everybody, but they have compassion on those who they have come to care about. It is presented as a good choice, but is deeply unsatisfying on closer inspection. If four people could be saved, then why not five, or six, or seven? The Doctor may have been correct that he couldn't save the town of Pompeii, but how many of the twenty-thousand inhabitants actually had to die? When we see problems in the world, we often, like Donna, want to do something to help. However, it is very easy for us to appease our consciences by giving aid to a select few, often those with whom we feel a special bond, while ignoring the suffering of everyone else. Like the Doctor and Donna in this episode, we often seem to feel that since we can't save everybody then we have done well when we save a few. Perhaps a more ethical approach to extreme suffering would be to see how many people we can save.

At the end of the episode the Doctor is venerated as a god by those he has saved. This is, perhaps, almost appropriate given the god-like decisions he has been forced to make. Far more powerful than any ordinary mortal, given his ability to transcend space and time, the Doctor has chosen to allow a terrible disaster and has decided who should survive this event and who should not. While we are often genuinely helpless in the face of suffering, a figure with this kind of power always has a choice about how things turn out. And this raises perhaps the biggest questions of all. How does God make moral decisions of this nature? How does he choose who lives and who dies? How can an all-powerful, loving God allow the terrible suffering that goes on in our world?

There are no easy answers to these questions and there is not space in this article to do justice to the hard answers to which Christians often point when confronted with suffering. However, all Christians who struggle with these issues can find

comfort and hope by knowing that God sees the whole picture: 'I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please' (Isaiah 46:10, NIV). More than this, they can also look to the fixed point in history when the Lord of Time came to live with us, and die a terrible death for our sake. Not only can the example of Jesus provide guidance on how to live a moral life, but he also reveals the loving character of God, and provides a way for us to know God personally in the midst of our pain. Christians may not be able to provide a complete answer to why God should choose to allow some to suffer, but they believe that he knows what it is like to experience incredible suffering, and that his death makes it possible for us to look forward to a future with 'no more death or sorrow or crying or pain' (Revelation 21:4, NLT) when he returns.

For a much fuller treatment of the problem of suffering, try reading 'How Can I Believe in God When There's So Much Suffering?' by Michael Ramsden or 'The Problem of Evil' by Dr William Lane Craig. If you prefer listening, try Dr Timothy J. Keller on 'Suffering: If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?' or Dr William Lane Craig on 'How Can a Good God allow Suffering and Evil?'

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