Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture

From Socrates to *South Park*,
Hume to *House*

Edited by William Irwin and
David Kyle Johnson

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

Part I: What is Philosophy? 3

Introduction 3

Socrates and the Spirit of Philosophy

1 Flatulence and Philosophy: A Lot of Hot Air, or the Corruption of Youth? 5
   William W. Young III

Logic and Fallacies

2 The Chewbacca Defense: A South Park Logic Lesson 14
   Robert Arp

Relativism and Truth

3 Wikiality, Truthiness, and Gut Thinking: Doing Philosophy 25
   Colbert-Style
   David Kyle Johnson

Part II: Epistemology 37

Introduction 37

The Ethics of Belief

4 You Know, I Learned Something Today: Stan Marsh and the Ethics of Belief 39
   Henry Jacoby
Skepticism

5 Tumbling Down the Rabbit Hole: Knowledge, Reality, and the Pit of Skepticism  46
Matt Lawrence

The Definition of Knowledge, the Gettier Problem, and Faith

6 Adama’s True Lie: Earth and the Problem of Knowledge  57
Eric J. Silverman

Part III: Metaphysics  67

Introduction  67

Philosophy of Mind

7 Mind and Body in Zion  69
Matt Lawrence

Personal Identity

8 Amnesia, Personal Identity, and the Many Lives of Wolverine  82
Jason Southworth

Freedom and Determinism

9 Destiny in the Wizarding World  89
Jeremy Pierce

Artificial Intelligence, The Turing Test, and the Chinese Room

10 The Terminator Wins: Is the Extinction of the Human Race the End of People, or Just the Beginning?  99
Greg Littmann

Part IV: Philosophy of Religion  109

Introduction  109

The Problem of Evil

11 Cartmanland and the Problem of Evil  111
David Kyle Johnson

Faith Seeking Understanding

12 Aquinas and Rose on Faith and Reason  119
Daniel B. Gallagher

Arguments for the Existence of God

13 “I Am an Instrument of God”: Religious Belief, Atheism, and Meaning  128
Jason T. Eberl and Jennifer A. Vines
Part V: Ethics 139

Introduction 139

Why Be Moral?

14 Plato on Gyges’ Ring of Invisibility: The Power of Heroes and the Value of Virtue 141
Don Adams

Virtue Ethics

15 The Virtues of Humor: What The Office Can Teach Us About Aristotle’s Ethics 151
Sean McAleer

Utilitarianism and Deontology

16 Why Doesn’t Batman Kill the Joker? 163
Mark D. White

17 Means, Ends, and the Critique of Pure Superheroes 172
J. Robert Loftis

Part VI: Challenges to Traditional Ethics 183

Introduction 183

Nietzschean and Marxist Critique

18 Metallica, Nietzsche, and Marx: The Immorality of Morality 185
Peter S. Fosl

19 When Machines Get Souls: Nietzsche on the Cylon Uprising 194
Robert Sharp

Existentialist Ethics

20 Being-in-The Office: Sartre, the Look, and the Viewer 204
Matthew P. Meyer and Greg J. Schneider

21 Batman’s Confrontation with Death, Angst, and Freedom 213
David M. Hart

Feminist Critique

22 “You Care for Everybody”: Cameron’s Ethics of Care 221
Renee Kyle

23 Vampire Love: The Second Sex Negotiates the Twenty-First Century 228
Bonnie Mann

Postmodern Critique

24 Killing the Griffins: A Murderous Exposition of Postmodernism 238
J. Jeremy Wisnewski
# Contents

Part VII: Social and Political Philosophy 247

Introduction 247

Social Contract Theory  

25 Lost’s State of Nature 249  
Richard Davies  

Marxism  

26 Laughter Between Distraction and Awakening: Marxist Themes in The Office 260  
Michael Bray  

Torture  

27 The Ethics of Torture in 24: Shockingly Banal 269  
Dónal P. O’Mathúna  

Race  

28 Mutants and the Metaphysics of Race 280  
Jeremy Pierce  

Part VIII: Eastern Views 287

Introduction 287

Zen  

29 Zen and the Art of Cylon Maintenance 289  
James McRae  

30 The Sound of One House Clapping: The Unmannerly Doctor as Zen Rhetorician 299  
Jeffrey C. Ruff and Jeremy Barris  

Taoism  

31 The Tao of the Bat 308  
Mark D. White  

Part IX: The Meaning of Life 317

Introduction 317

The Theistic View  

32 Beyond Godric’s Hollow: Life after Death and the Search for Meaning 319  
Jonathan L. Walls and Jerry L. Walls  

The Socratic View  

33 Selfish, Base Animals Crawling Across the Earth: House and the Meaning of Life 327  
Henry Jacoby  

Glossary 334

Notes on Contributors 338

Sources 343

Index 347
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Introduction

Philosophy has a public relations problem. Just the sound of the word “philosophy” scares a lot of people, conjuring images of long-dead Greeks and crusty old professors. But the stereotypes of philosophy are just that – stereotypes. They are mistaken exaggerations and overgeneralizations. Western Philosophy may have begun in Ancient Greece, but it is alive and well in contemporary America and around the globe. Some philosophy professors may be egg-headed, ivory tower intellectuals, but most are not. In fact, many philosophy professors like the same things you like: television, movies, music, and video games. We see connections between these elements of pop culture and philosophy. So this book, written by philosophy professors, takes you from pop culture to philosophy; we wade into the shallow water before swimming out deep. Each chapter focuses on a piece of pop culture, like *Harry Potter* or *The Office*, and teaches you about a particular issue in philosophy or the views of a particular philosopher. We think you’ll agree that, to paraphrase a classic Disney truism, a spoonful of pop culture helps the philosophy go down.

The idea of using examples to facilitate learning is not new to philosophy. Famously, Plato (429–347 BCE) used the story of the ring of Gyges, and Descartes (1596–1650) imagined a deceitful demon. However, most examples in philosophy are rather dry – finding people with bland names like Jones and Brown in difficult to describe circumstances, such as those in which we are potentially justified in believing that “Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.” Thankfully, Hollywood writers do a much better job of creating engaging, imaginative scenarios than philosophers do. So why not use their creations to add spice to philosophy? As you’ll discover in this book, *The Matrix* provides a vivid way of picturing Descartes’ concerns about deception and knowledge, and *South Park* hilariously dramatizes the problem of evil by asking why good things (like inheriting a million dollars) happen to bad people (like Cartman). Indeed, many other insightful philosophical illustrations from pop culture await your reading.
Now, of course, you may be concerned that you’re in trouble because in addition to being clueless about philosophy you’re also clueless about The Matrix and South Park. There’s no need to worry. You don’t have to be an expert on Batman or to have seen every episode of House to benefit from this book. Even a passing acquaintance with the pop culture icon discussed in any given chapter will be enough for you to learn the philosophy to which it is connected. You can get that easily enough on the Internet. In fact, you can visit the website for this book at www.pop-philosophy.org for all kinds of helpful up-to-date links.

In sum, this book is intended to make initial connections between pop culture and philosophy that will pique your interest in the latter and lead you to study and appreciate the subject more deeply. Maybe you’ll even decide to tell your friends that philosophy has gotten a bad rap. Certainly, we believe you’ll find that philosophy is relevant, fun, and exciting.

How to Use this Book in a Philosophy Course

This book is intended to serve primarily as a supplementary text in Introduction to Philosophy courses. Introductory courses are structured in a variety of different ways depending on the professor. Some courses are questions and issues based, some are historically based. Some courses use a standard textbook; others rely on primary philosophical texts. Others mix it up and use a combination of approaches. This book is designed to go along with any of them. However, this book is not intended to cover all philosophical issues and figures in exhaustive detail. We leave that for the main text and the professor.

This book can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. Its chapters can be used to introduce a philosophical topic unfamiliar to the student. Assigning a summary of the chapter can ensure the student reads it and is better prepared for a lecture on the topic of the chapter. Each chapter could also be used for philosophical reflection; you might consider having your students write reflection or argument papers in response to them. If you are worried about whether your students are familiar with the relevant pop culture phenomena, there is a wiki site for each pop culture phenomenon discussed (e.g., heroeswiki.com) that can provide a quick and easy summary. Other suggestions for professors on how to use this book in courses are available at www.pop-philosophy.org.
Introduction

The word “philosophy” is often confused with the words “opinion,” “theory” or “approach” – as in, “What is your philosophy of life?” or “Our philosophy is never to be undersold!” As a result, some students have mistaken ideas about what a philosophy class is. “Can you even give a wrong answer in a philosophy class? Isn’t it just whatever you think?” Well, yes you can, and no it’s not.

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek language and means “love of wisdom.” Philosophers seek truth and wisdom above all else. The questions for which true answers are most important, but most elusive, form the core of philosophy. What is the nature of reality? What is knowledge, and how can one attain it? Is there a God? What is the nature of good and evil? How can I live a good life? How should we govern ourselves? What is the meaning of life? So how do philosophers seek answers these questions? Are there really answers? Or is whatever anyone thinks just “true for them” because they have a “right to their opinion”? What role does philosophy play in society? And, what attitude does philosophy require?

In his chapter, William Young argues that philosophy and the TV show *South Park* share some common aims. Like the philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), *South Park* is charged with corrupting the youth, inappropriately challenging moral norms, and being a social nuisance. But, the accusations are unfounded for both Socrates and *South Park*. The accusers are actually the corruptors; for example, parents corrupt the youth when they leave their kids to be raised by television without educating them about what they are seeing. Thankfully *South Park*, like Socrates, teaches us to draw our own conclusions – not merely accept the consensus of the crowd – and to reach those conclusions by considering the perspectives of others. Clearly, Young argues, *South Park* is not mindless and harmful; the show, like philosophy, is a gadfly, “an annoying pest that goes around ‘stinging people’ with . . . challenging questions and critical reflections so as to keep them intellectually awake and on their toes.”
These philosophy and popular culture texts do this superbly. In Philosophy and the Simpsons, for example, Raja Halwani takes Aristotle’s theory of virtue from the Nichomachean Ethics and with crisp clarity demonstrates how Homer fails to measure up. I am willing to believe that some students, otherwise unmoved by Aristotle’s classic text, could use Homer to experience a new twinge of curiosity or insight about how one should understand a good character. Many have reported such moments of enlightenment from reconsidering something they already understand. That patronizing stance is suggested in the Blackwell desire to use the sugar of pop culture to eliminate the cobwebs from Kant. Reference http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1431045/quotes Introducing Philosophy through Pop from HUM 300 at Excelsior College. This preview shows page 3 - 7 out of 10 pages. Reference: Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture from Socrates to South Park, Hume to House (p. 151-152) Virtue Ethics. Nihilism: Nihilism: the rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless. Deadpool: should’ve come and found you sooner, but the guy under this mask, he ain’t the same one that you remember. To that reviewer, introductory philosophy needed to be more welcoming, and that focusing that narrowly was inappropriate. I protested vigorously, but got nowhere in my So this is it - I’ve reviewed the last chapter, and the journey of reviewing the book chapter by chapter has left me in a reflective mood. It all started because, while reviewing the book for fun, I ran across a bad, 1-star review that panned the book (without reading it) for reaching out only to a narrow section of pop culture. To that reviewer, introductory philosophy needed to be more welcoming, and that focusing that na
Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. The term was probably coined by Pythagoras (c. 570â€“495 BCE). Philosophical methods include questioning, critical discussion, rational argument, and systematic presentation. Classic philosophical questions include: Is it possible to know anything and to prove it? What is most real? Philosophers also pose more practical and concrete questions such as: Is there Semantic Scholar extracted view of "Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture" by Eric F. Bronson. @article{Bronson2012IntroducingPT, title= {Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture}, author={Eric F. Bronson}, journal={Teaching Philosophy}, year={2012}, volume={35}, pages={87-89} }. Eric F. Bronson. Published 2012. Philosophy. Teaching Philosophy. View via Publisher. Save to Library. Start by marking â€œIntroducing Philosophy Through Pop Culture: From Socrates to South Park, Hume to Houseâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦ Want to Read.Â series, as well as helpful editorial material and a glossary of philosophical terms From metaphysics to epistemology; from ethics to the meaning of life, this unique introduction makes philosophy as engaging as popular culture itself Supplementary website available with teaching guides, sample materials and links to further resources at www.pop-philosophy.org ...more.