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Looking Up From the Gutter: Philosophy and Popular Culture

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In 2001, Open Court published *The Simpsons and Philosophy*. I think I received six or seven copies for Christmas that year. Other philosophy professors I know (and there aren't many, since we're all loners) received a similar glut of "the Simpsons book."

Friends and relatives, who had long struggled to have any way of relating to my field of expertise, finally had some gesture of bonding. Before the publication of this popular title (which has sold over a quarter of a million copies) and the many that followed at Open Court, people always reverted to shoe gazing whenever I revealed at a social event that I was a philosopher by trade. After titles like *Seinfeld and Philosophy* (1999), *Star Wars and Philosophy* (2005), and *The Matrix and Philosophy* (2002) began to appear, my cocktail-party conversations got a little better. Truth be told, however, philosophy remains a nonstarter for bonding purposes, and even the most charitable and affectionate banter still devolves into questions like, "Remember that hilarious episode when Kramer says to Jerry ... ?"

Philosophy has never had a good relationship with popular culture. The two domains seem like different planets, each with an atmosphere toxic to the other. Thales (625?-2547 BC), the first philosopher, is famous for being so out of touch with the mundane world that he once fell down a well because he was distracted by deep thought. Philosophy broods, analyzes, and tends toward the antisocial; pop culture celebrates, wallows, and tends toward the communal. Philosophy is for cynics, and pop culture is for bimbos.

But the recent trend in publishing, dominated by Open Court and Blackwell, has tried to undo those old stereotypes. Perhaps its chief architect, or hardest worker, is William Irwin, an associate professor of philosophy at King's College, in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Irwin was the series editor of Open Court's "Popular Culture and Philosophy" from 2003 to 2007, generating more than 20 titles, including *The Sopranos and Philosophy*, *Harry Potter and Philosophy*, and *The Beatles and Philosophy*. Open Court's series originated when the press's editorial director, David Ramsay Steele, decided to follow up on the success of the one-off *Seinfeld and Philosophy*. The Open Court series is currently being edited by George Reisch, an instructor at Northwestern University's School of Continuing Studies, and the ever-busy William Irwin has moved on to Blackwell, where he's put seven new titles on the docket for 2007 alone in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series.

Philosophers, who devote much of their attention to remote texts, are seen by many as irretrievably elitist. But elitism isn't always bad. Professional sprinters, for example, are an elite group, too, but nobody holds it against them.

If it were only cultural bias that shaped philosophy, then it would seem high time to overthrow the old hegemony Kant, Aristotle, Hegel, and their ilk, and open the doors to Buffy, Bart, and Neo. In fact, an entire branch of cultural studies is devoted to destroying the old hierarchies of high culture over pop culture. The original impetus for that movement (typified in the Birmingham School, 1968-2002) was a laudable attempt to rescue working-class culture from infra dig academic obscurity. Good scholarship was, and still is, done under the assumption that, say, the blues (to pick a random example) is as important for academic study as chamber music. Unfortunately, postmodern cultural studies, in typical melodramatic fashion, wants the humanities to throw out all criteria of "high" and "low" (after all, wasn't Shakespeare low and then high?), but finds itself with no alternative for assessing quality or value in art, film, or literature.

My relativist undergraduates feel empowered by a leveling theory that puts their favorite rock band on equal footing with Bach and Mozart; but watch how quickly a qualitative hierarchy races back when, in the interests of consistency, you suggest that their favorite band must be no better than the Backstreet Boys (or that their favorite bohemian film is no better than, only different from, *Police Academy 5*). The old dichotomies between elite and popular, and high and low, may indeed be vexed by unjustifiable privileges, but without a new language of merit for the arts, the postmodernists are forced to live in a flattened landscape where Barry Manilow and Beethoven are equals. In principle, the postmodernists are happy to do so, because anything else would be hegemonic propaganda. In practice, however, their hearts are as autocratic as yours and mine (and they frequently elevate their own favorites with praise of "keepin' it real").

You might think that the young Turk philosophers at Blackwell and Open Court would relish the cultural-studies marriage of academe and popular culture — but you'd be wrong. Philosophers who are writing about the Beatles and *South Park* and so on are choosing shows and music that seem particularly suggestive of intellectual sophistication. The writers, who are often already established philosophers, tend to be fans of the particular show or band, and they are writing for other fans who may sense the intellectual dimension but not fully grasp it.

"We have fairly definite ideas about the audience," George Reisch explains. "They are genuine fans who take very seriously the TV shows or movies or rock bands in question. They additionally believe that there are meanings or depths or ironies that many fans either do not see or do not appreciate. So, to craft an example, the guy who loves Pink Floyd because he remembers it fondly as highly effective bachelor-pad music is probably not going to buy our forthcoming 'Pink Floyd and Philosophy.' But the fan who recognizes that the band's music really was (or still is) some kind of existential soundtrack to modern life probably will buy it."

Unlike the cultural-studies explorations of popular culture, these new philosophy titles have little interest in decoding the semiotics of the pop narratives. They do not play in the arena of associations and connotations to suggest possible readings of sitcoms or tunes, some "preferential" and some "engaging the margins." In general, these pop-culture philosophers don't "negotiate boundaries" or "problematize discourses." They do something much more refreshing and radical: They give arguments. They use TV, music, and movies to begin a discussion, but very quickly they start to generate premises, draw conclusions, check inductions against evidence, venture deductions, consider counter-instances, and so on.

They are not interested in comparing their reading of evil in Hitchcock with your reading of Hitchcock (or the latest film-crit-journal readings of Hitchcock); they're interested in evil. If their argument about God, for example, starts from a TV show but then moves well beyond that show into the conceptual stratosphere and back into the history of philosophy, then that's just fine. No fault, no error. They believe that some things (e.g., arguments about God, or causality, or epistemology) are more important than

South Park or *The Matrix* or Metallica — in fact, it's that sense of intellectual importance that probably led them to love the particular show or band in the first place. The show or band is not an intellectual end in itself. One essay in *The Simpsons and Philosophy* applies Aristotelian virtue ethics, in a comical and enlightening way, to Homer Simpson. It is obvious, as you read it (and this is true for the other books in these series), that the goal is to give us a better understanding of Aristotle's philosophy, while Homer's literary complexities, thankfully, come in a distant second. For the most part, the books are successful in reaching their goals.

An emblematic approach can be found in Gary L. Hardcastle's article "Themes in Contemporary Analytical Philosophy as Reflected in the Work of Monty Python," a chapter in *Monty Python and Philosophy: Nudge Nudge, Think Think!*, a 2006 book in the Open Court series. Hardcastle, an assistant professor of philosophy at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, unpacks the 20th-century epistemological debate between verificationism (logical positivists like M. Schlick, R. Carnap, and A.J. Ayer), and semantic holism (W.V. Quine, Thomas Kuhn, and the later Wittgenstein) by using the famous Python parrot sketch and the Black Knight dismemberment fight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In the parrot sketch, John Cleese (Mr. Praline) attempts to return a dead parrot to the pet store where he purchased it, and Michael Palin (the shopkeeper) uses an infuriating casuistry to deny the deceased state of the parrot. Hardcastle has to do a fair amount of real philosophy before we can appreciate this point, and when he analyzes the sketch, it actually sheds some light on the philosophical debate.

Hardcastle explains that "Mr. Praline, the man attempting to return the parrot, is our verificationist, as is evidenced by his attempt to verify the death of the parrot by reference to experience, such as seeing that it's motionless, its falling to the ground when sent aloft, its being nailed to its perch, and so on. The shopkeeper is our philosophically more sophisticated holist. He knows that maintaining the truth of other statements, concerning for example the bird's strength and its affection for the fjords, will allow him to maintain that the parrot is alive."

Notice that the shopkeeper is like the famous Black Knight from *Holy Grail*, who, despite having his limbs successively chopped off, continues to define himself as the victor in his battle with King Arthur. The holist shopkeeper need never accept that the parrot is dead, if he keeps explaining the observation of its motionless state by appeal to increasingly elaborate theories.

Is this new wave of philosophers exploiting pop culture in the service of philosophical inquiry? What can Dylan's lyrics tell us about our concepts of God? What can Monty Python teach us about epistemology? Cultural-studies scholars may balk, claiming that, in the hands of philosophers, popular culture is not being analyzed on its own terms, but is being used only to get at perennial intellectual issues of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. That's probably true, but pop-culture philosophers are unapologetic.

"We need," says William Irwin, "a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down." In his essay "Philosophy as/and/of Popular Culture," in *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture*, he writes: "We need to start with popular culture and use it to bring people to philosophy. This is what I've attempted to do in editing *Seinfeld and Philosophy* and related books."

Cultural-studies folks, with their emphasis on identity politics, don't have some higher ground on the issue, either. They claim to interpret popular culture on its own terms, but they engage in a theory-laden torture of the "texts" to get them to sing Marxist, or psychoanalytic, or feminist tunes. The only people taking popular culture on its own terms (not heavily interpreting it) are the people (even academics on their days off) who are just being entertained by it — and apparently they're under suspicion and need edification.

Irwin, whose writings on pop culture exude a somewhat charming and amusing sense of mission, sees these books as providing a significant service. "Citizens of a democracy," he explains, "are better citizens for the knowledge of philosophy, as it teaches them to think critically and encourages them to dissent responsibly." He likens the pop-culture books to training wheels on a bicycle — presumably readers will grow comfortable enough with *The Matrix* to read Descartes directly.

The track record for this sort of edutainment is dodgy and its future unclear. I remember, for example, curators at the Field Museum, in Chicago, once telling me that they had brought recent traveling exhibits about Harley-Davidson motorcycles and chocolate and couture jewelry and Jacqueline Kennedy's dresses in hopes that visitors would come to see the flashy stuff but then wander over to the more substantive permanent exhibits, too. The curators also spoke of sugar and medicine. Careful analysis of the foot traffic, however, revealed that visitors came for the candy and exited the museum straightway — no additional nutrition was ingested.

In the end, I suspect that, despite these excellent new efforts, philosophy will remain intractable and estranged from popular culture. It will remain so not because it is biased or willfully elite, but because it is in an extremely self-reflexive relationship with its own history, and it requires highly disciplined, systematic, abstract conceptualization, a skill that does not come easily to most people.

One can barely make a move within the oldest academic discipline without understanding its past. People who don't know its vast literature feel excluded from the import of any particular philosopher or problem. That kind of exclusion can be remedied by doing the requisite study — by catching up, so to speak, on a body of knowledge. But philosophy is more than just a body of knowledge; it is an ability to examine the structures of thought itself. Simon Blackburn calls that "conceptual engineering," in order to distinguish it from regular empirical investigation. The requirement makes philosophy unpopular in the same sense that higher mathematics is unpopular.

Despite the hurdles of making philosophy popular (and pop culture more philosophical), there is still plenty of room to make it more enjoyable. And here the new publishing trend is definitely resonating with the next generation of philosophers. Old-school philosophers may see pop culture as a gutter, but I believe it was Oscar Wilde (or was it Chrissie Hynde, of the Pretenders?) who said, "We are all of us in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

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