Philosophy in Review

William Irwin and David Kyle Johnson, eds. "Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture: From Socrates to Star Wars and Beyond"

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William Irwin and David Kyle Johnson, eds. *Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture: From Socrates to Star Wars and Beyond,*2nd ed. Wiley-Blackwell 2022. 432 pp. $36.95 USD (Paperback 9781119757177).

Editors Irwin and Johnson are clearly targeting instructors of, and students in, introductory philosophy courses, even as they make some references to outside readers. *Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture* has a fairly simple aim: to demonstrate 'that philosophy is relevant, fun, and exciting' (2). Irwin and Johnson, philosophy professors at King's College in Pennsylvania, largely succeed in their aims with this expanded second edition of a book first released over twelve years ago.

Following the table of contents, which includes an italicized descriptor for most of the chapters/essays, the front matter for *Introducing* provides biographic details for each contributor, a list of acknowledgments, a short section on permissions for the essays, and a brief overall introduction. The book proper is divided into nine thematic parts/sections, each of them having their own short overview that introduces the chapters therein. The parts range in length from as many as nine to as few two essays. Each chapter includes endnotes, followed by a helpful overall index to close out the book. There is also a dedicated website for additional materials related to *Introducing.*

Part One, 'What is Philosophy?', begins by disabusing readers of the notion that, in philosophy, it is a relativistic free-for-all with no wrong answers (3). The lead chapter, airily titled 'Flatulence and Philosophy', by William W. Young, III, suggests that the show *South Park* engages in dialectical exchanges quite in keeping with the Platonic tradition. Young opines that the cartoon 'addresses moral issues through a discussion and criticism of established' norms 'which are found to be inadequate' (8).

'Epistemology', the second section, covers varied terrain in its attempt to explicate the relationship between popular culture and the study of knowledge. Matt Lawrence's 'Tumbling Down the Rabbit Hole' applies a dose of Descartes to the *Matrix* trilogy of films. Given that the films challenge the nature of reality, as lived and/or believed, Lawrence asserts that the virtual world of the movies is a 'technological version of Descartes' evil demon' (47).

Part Three, 'Metaphysics', is tied for being the longest section, comprising nine chapters. The editors suggest that, while 'questions about the nature of the world' are engaging, 'some of the most interesting contemporary questions about reality focus on our understanding of ourselves'

(72). Dara Fogel's 'Life on a Holodeck' suggests that Star Trek offers lessons regarding reality. Ranging from Plato's allegory of the cave to the realms of contemporary neuroscience and physics, she asserts that we might be 'living in a cosmic video game' that is roughly equivalent to the simulations found on the holodeck of the USS Enterprise (78). Bradley Richards asks the question 'What is it Like to Be a Host?' Framed as a discussion of season one of the series *Westworld*, the authors work through questions relating to consciousness. Noting that the hosts (biological robots) have questionable relationships with things like perception, memory, and emotions, Richards nonetheless hedges on the question that frames the chapter, telling the reader 'to decide for yourself' (135).

'Philosophy of Religion', the third section is, with just three essays, one of the shorter sections. It concerns itself with the nature of divinity, no less questions related to evil and faith. Robert Garcia and Timothy Pickavance's 'Hidden Mickeys and the Hiddenness of God' asserts that Disney's famous mouse, images of which are sprinkled throughout the Magic Kingdom, can help us access questions about the existence of God. But these intentional choices on the part of corporate employees can only take us so far, as they 'don't take us all the way to a solution to the problem of divine hiddenness' (162).

Part Five, 'Ethics', uses superheroes, sitcoms, and cinematic touchstones to explore 'the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice' (173). Mark White examines the differences between utilitarianism and deontology in 'Why Doesn't Batman Kill the Joker?' He asserts that the former school would endorse such an action, whereas the latter would not (177).

'Challenges to Traditional Ethics', the sixth section, ranges from engagements with feminism to the challenges to be found in considering environmental ethics. In 'Rediscovering Nietzsche's Übermensch in Superman as a Heroic Ideal', Arno Bogaerts challenges traditional interpretations of the Man of Steel. The author argues that the superhero's actions are 'the fulfillment of the destiny he has carved out for himself—in other words, Nietzsche's will to power' (225). J. Lenore Wright's 'Becoming a (Wonder) Woman' places a different superhero into contact with the ideas of philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The author opines that the ideas of a real philosopher and the actions of a fictional superhero (and her fans) can, despite challenges, 'chart a promising path forward' while dismantling 'the barriers hat impede women's advancement in the public sphere' (243).

Part Seven, 'Social and Political Philosophy', is also made up of nine chapters. Therein, authors place historical markers from the likes of Locke and Hobbes into contact with more

contemporaneous examples such as *Game of Thrones* and *Black Mirror*. One of the more illuminating essays in this section is Roy Cook's examination of race in 'Ninjas, Kobe Bryant, and Yellow Plastic'. After exploring complicated notions relating to conceptualizations of race, Cook posits that the history of LEGO reveals that race is 'constituted by changeable, unstable social and political factors and contexts' (312).

'Eastern Views', the short eighth section, is framed as providing 'a different orientation' that is 'primarily concerned with articulating a way of life' (349). Like Cook's essay in the previous section, the first two chapters lean on LEGO for insights into Daoism and Buddhism, respectively. The third and final essay, Steve Bein's 'Zen and the Art of Imagineering', returns to the Magic Kingdom to provide a contrast to the traditions of Buddhism.   Whereas the former provides a form of heroic escapism with rewards that turn out to be illusory, the latter offers a path to liberation wherein one 'makes peace' with their problems in the here and now (373).

Part Nine, 'The Afterlife and Meaning', is framed somewhat curiously when compared to previous sections. The first essay advances the resolution that 'An Afterlife Gives Meaning' which the second essay attempts to rebut. Jonathan and Jerry Walls focus on the *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* books. They note that the ambiguity about the hereafter in the earlier volumes gives way to a suggestion of the afterlife (383). In so doing, Rowling aligns more with the likes of William James than Martin Heidegger, suggesting that 'the choices we make in this life may be vastly more consequential than if death, the last enemy, were never destroyed' (383). David Kyle Johnson explores the television show *The Good Place*. The suggestion is that that said place would turn out to be both a delusion and a bad place. As regards the former, even if an afterlife did exist 'we could never be justified in believing' that it was real (387). Regarding the latter, an eternity in such a place 'would eventually become torture' (390).

In a book of this length, there are bound to be essays that are more or less effective in making the case for the overall theme in any given section. At the same time, however, there are more than enough essays from which an interested reader, or instructor, might pick. Some of the shorter parts—such as those dealing with religion or the afterlife—might have helpfully been combined to create a more organic, and developed, section. At the same time, some chapters read as if they might have been more profitably placed in a different section. There is a touch of redundancy when one compares the summaries in the introductions to the sections with the chapters themselves, insofar as each chapter also contains its own summary. It is also the case that, when reviewing the permissions list, many of these essays already appeared in books dealing with the links between

popular culture and philosophy, often ones published by Wiley-Blackwell and on occasion edited by Johnson. As a final quibble, the introduction to the first part is not listed in the table of contents.

As the back-cover suggests, *Introducing* is designed to be a 'supplementary textbook for introductory philosophy courses', even if it is perhaps less effectively framed as a 'valuable guide for general readers'. Irwin and Johnson are to be applauded for finding new ways to repackage extant materials. Hopefully, the book will engage students and inspire in them a love of wisdom.

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