

Philosophy needs to be popularised, as science needs to be popularised, and philosophy professors should be involved in the popularisation of philosophy, rather than leaving the task to well-meaning amateurs. Popular science is not necessarily pseudo-science; in fact, it rarely is. Likewise, popular philosophy does not have to be pseudo-philosophy. To democratise philosophy is not necessarily to “dumb it down” but to make it available in at least some form for all.

Fancy taking a pop?

WILLIAM IRWIN DEFENDS THE GROWTH OF BOOKS ON POP CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

Ten years have passed since the publication of *Seinfeld and Philosophy*. That book led to *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, which led to *The Matrix and Philosophy*, which has led to an ever-expanding list of books that take philosophy to the general public by discussing the subject in terms of pop culture. Despite the success of this mission, misperceptions and misdirected criticisms of the “and Philosophy” books persist. While I’ve dealt with nearly all of the criticisms before, they seem to warrant address again. (I can only speak for the books that I edited during

my time with Open Court and the books in my current series with Blackwell.)

Some philosophers are concerned that the “and Philosophy” books will hurt the public perception of philosophy, that the books misrepresent philosophy as trivial and frivolous. This fear is misplaced. Philosophy has had a public relations problem for a few centuries now, but it has nothing to do with philosophy being trivial or frivolous. Rather, people mistakenly think philosophy is some dry, dusty, irrelevant academic subject taught by bearded professors in tweed jackets with suede patches on the elbows.

Books in my series aim to correct that misperception by showing people how philosophy is relevant. Philosophy can and should guide our lives. And there is no reason to

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think that the public perception of philosophy is changing to regard it as a frivolous discipline as a result of these books. Sometimes people think that philosophy is just plain bullshit, but that has nothing to do with “and Philosophy” books. In fact these books have convinced lots of people that philosophy is not bullshit by educating them about what philosophy actually is.

The audience for these books is the general public. Sadly, most students go through four years of college without taking a single philosophy course, and the result is a philosophically illiterate society. The aim of these books, then, is to take philosophy to people who might not otherwise be exposed to philosophy. People think better and more critically about things they like and are interested in, whether it be sports, movies, rap music, whatever. The hope is that if we can get them to think philosophically about these things they will come to see the value of philosophy in itself. To paraphrase a British philosopher, we use a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.

Philosophy needs to be popularised, as science needs to be popularised, and philosophy professors

should be involved in the popularisation of philosophy, rather than leaving the task to well-meaning amateurs. Popular science is not necessarily pseudo-science; in fact, it rarely is. Most popular science simply explains scientific theories and discoveries *sans* mathematics.

Of course popular science risks oversimplifying and misrepresenting the science, but that is a much lesser risk than depriving the public of a comprehensible account. Likewise, popular philosophy does not have to be pseudo-philosophy. To democratise philosophy is not necessarily to “dumb it down” but to make it available in at least some form for all. The “and Philosophy” books are, of course, just one such way to democratise and spread philosophy.

The recent call for submissions for *Avatar and Philosophy* resulted in several philosophers criticising the topic as unworthy and criticising my series for choosing topics badly. Some may have the mistaken impression that my series has the mentality of “any idea will do”. But that’s not the case. My series rejects over 90 percent of the ideas that





are proposed. Not just anything will work. For example, *American Idol*, though massively popular, wouldn't work as the basis of an "and Philosophy" book because it isn't the kind of thing the general public thinks seriously about.

Chapters in these books aim to introduce a philosophical question, problem, issue, or historical figure to a general audience by making connections with pop culture. The goal is often to correct mistaken, incomplete, or shallow philosophical notions in the popular culture.

The idea is not, for example, that *Star Wars* can tell you everything about Heidegger's view of technology. Rather, *Star Wars* supplies examples and can be the basis for thought experiments to illustrate Heidegger's view of technology. In this way, these books continue a

tradition in philosophy, dating back to Plato, of using vivid examples and thought experiments.

There is, in fact, no single litmus test for determining what topic will work well for a volume. And sometimes we get it wrong; witness *The Atkins Diet and Philosophy*. In general, though, literate, witty, insightful popular culture that inspires people to discuss it with one another seriously makes for the best "and Philosophy" topics. There is a natural tendency to think that a topic is bad if one doesn't like it. For example, there is nothing particularly deep about *Twilight* and lots of people don't like the books or the movies. But more to the point, *Twilight* is wildly popular, especially among teenage girls, and it can be used quite nicely to raise a host of philosophical issues, from immortality to the meaning of life to personal identity to gender roles.

Some people complain that we should write books on more serious popular culture topics, such as *The Tudors*, but this misses the point as well. The goal is not to highlight or educate people about what is best in popular culture. We take the public's taste as a given, from their love of *The Simpsons* to their fascination with *The Matrix*, and start from there. Certainly we could write very good books on obscure art-house films like *Pi* or *Precious*, or TV series like *The Wire* or *Deadwood*, but the audiences were quite small in television and cinema terms and we would not reach the intended audience. We would be preaching to the converted. So publishing those books would not be in line with the mission of reaching as many varied people as possible with philosophy.

A quick look at the possible topics listed in one of the calls for submissions in my series

might lead one to think that we are taking pop culture too seriously. But that is to miss the point of the suggested topics. The lists of possible topics in the calls for submissions are brainstorming cues and prompts, not final products.

Consider these for example from the call for submissions to *Avatar and Philosophy*: Neytiri, Grace, Mo'at, and the Feminine Care Ethic; Merleau-Ponty, Avatars, and the Phenomenology of the Body; The Na'vi Way of Life: Hobbes Versus Rousseau on the State of Nature; "I See You": Levinas, the Face, and Responsibility to the Other; Is Jake a Traitor?: *Avatar* and Royce's Philosophy of Loyalty.

Some of the suggestions may seem inane to someone who can't imagine credible essays written on those topics. But, again, the topics are merely suggested possibilities, some of which will ultimately work, and some of which will not, depending on which ones manage to spark imagination.

Of course, the suggested topics readily lend themselves to parody, and in the spirit of good fun I've participated in these kinds of parodies myself, contributing to the "Mini-Golf and Philosophy" parody in the pop culture issue of *tpm*, for example. But let's remember that it's easy to critique something one isn't thoroughly familiar with by simply saying it has become a parody of itself. Just think how ridiculous the interests of most philosophers sound to the average person. And certainly lots of analytic philosophers think much continental philosophy is a parody of itself, and vice versa.

The aim of interpretation in these books is to teach philosophy without being teachy. Essays work best when they are not just a peg

on which to hang a lecture, though sometimes that's what we get. Ideally an essay should find something worthwhile in the pop culture icon and say or teach something worthwhile about it.

It is a difficult balancing act to produce an essay that will appeal to, and be of interest to, fans, yet be worthwhile philosophically. Noting a single philosophical connection is easy. Carrying through on a connection or a series of connections for a whole essay is difficult. It's not the kind of writing and interpretation that most philosophers are trained to do.

Obviously, quality varies across chapters, books, and book series. But just because something is sometimes done badly does not >>>



mean it is always done badly. Critics can always cherry-pick examples of “and Philosophy” done poorly, but we could just as easily cherry-pick bad articles in leading journals and bad papers presented at conferences. Given the nature of the volumes in my series, quality inevitably varies within a volume, but we do exercise quality control. Typically, calls for submission result in twice as many submissions as can be accepted.

The rationale for having multi-authored collections rather than single-author volumes is that it's unlikely that any one person would have enough interesting things to say about, for example, *Mad Men* and philosophy to fill a



book. Of course, the more people we have involved the greater the variations in quality. So volume editors work intensely with authors to make sure papers fit the genre and are of good quality. Some papers, however, cannot be published despite editorial assistance and are rejected.

No one, least of all myself, wants or advocates that the “and Philosophy” books be a substitute for the study of canonical texts any more than we want watching television to be a substitute for reading books. Nor is there serious danger of this becoming an unintended consequence. The “and Philosophy” books are like training wheels for philosophy, intended for general readers who are open to learning about philosophy through discussion of their favourite slice of pop culture.

Does interpretation of popular culture abuse philosophy? No. *Studying* popular culture as philosophy rather than *using* it for examples and communication would be abuse, at least abuse of philosophy. This is the kind of abuse that some mistakenly fear is taking place in the “and Philosophy” books; an understandable mistake, given that other academics, notably literary theorists, often study popular culture for its own sake, or, more correctly, for the sake of interpretation.

Such theorists take themselves and their subject matter too seriously. The tendency to value a creative reading of a text more highly than the text itself leads to accepting that the text itself need not even be aesthetically valuable as long as the interpretation is aesthetically pleasing, or interesting, or ideologically correct.

Such interpretation for the sake of

interpretation has become the bane of literary studies, though thankfully it has made no inroads into philosophy. In philosophy we can justify examining a piece of popular culture, even inferior popular culture, to illustrate a philosophical point or issue, but we cannot justify *studying* an inferior piece of popular culture for the sake of philosophical interpretation.

Despite what some have said, the interpretation involved in the “and Philosophy” books has nothing to do with postmodernism or deconstruction. My own interpretive principles honour authorial intention (see my *Intentionalist Interpretation*). In most cases the writers behind the pop culture under consideration did not intend to illustrate a philosophical idea. So what we are presenting is not the hidden meaning of the pop culture, but rather the philosophical significance.

It is worth noting, though, that philosophy is already in the culture just the way Shakespeare, Darwin, and Freud are. Indeed philosophy has shaped Western culture. So even when the writers behind movies and TV don’t consciously intend to work in philosophy, their products often have philosophical significance.

Commercial publishers, unlike endowed university presses, need books to be profitable. But despite some misperceptions, no one makes enough money off these books for the money to be a major motivation in doing the work. No one has gotten rich: not the authors, not the editors, not the publishers, and not me. Authors in my series get paid an honorarium, editors get modest royalties, and the publisher sells the books at deep trade discounts, actually losing money on some titles.



To be sure, some volumes have sold very well and made nice money for some editors and publishers. But, alas, we are still waiting for the day when someone gets rich off selling a book with “Philosophy” in the title. This leads me to correct another misconception: these books do not sell well because of the word “Philosophy” in the title. Amazingly, some have said that putting “and Philosophy” in a title is just a way of selling books. In fact, putting the word “Philosophy” in the title is one of the best ways to scare people off and discourage sales. Many pop culture topics that can find a large enough readership to support Unofficial or Unauthorised Guides cannot support “and Philosophy” books.

Finally, some might suggest that “and Philosophy” hurts the reputation of philosophy >>>

within the academy even if it helps with the public relations problem outside the academy. But that claim does not withstand scrutiny.

Philosophy suffers from a similar public relations problem inside the academy, with too many other disciplines regarding philosophy as an antiquated and irrelevant discipline. And in

We're just asking for respect in the spirit of tolerance and pluralism

any event I'm not proposing that "and Philosophy" articles replace journal articles for tenure evaluations and the like. These books are sometimes criticised for not containing anything that would be publishable in a journal. But that is a misguided criticism.

The goal of the essays in these books is not to make a novel contribution to scholarship. They are not peer-reviewed journal articles, and should not be treated as such in hiring and tenure decisions. However, they should not count against a candidate either. Ideally, they should be counted in a candidate's favour in the areas of service or teaching.

Work on popular culture and philosophy should at the very least be tolerated by departments as a hobby or avocation like any other, as long as its pursuit doesn't get in the way of producing and publishing mainstream scholarship. Of course, I would like to see the work appreciated, but tolerated would be enough. Indeed, there have been hundreds of contributors to the "and Philosophy" books,

including some of the most prominent members of the profession. We're not asking everyone to like the genre; we're just asking for respect in the spirit of tolerance and pluralism.

The most neglected part of Plato's celebrated allegory of the cave is the escaped prisoner's return. Once he has come to true knowledge in and of the higher world, he is not to remain there but to return from whence he came to share the knowledge. This is the duty of the philosophically educated Guardian in the *Republic*; it is the way of Socrates; and it is the duty of philosophers generally. Plato tells us that the returning prisoner must be prepared

to be mocked and persecuted, for he will be talking of a strange and unlikely world. What's worse, he will appear to be damaged goods, as he will no longer be able to see clearly the shadows on the wall as he once did.

How then is he to succeed in conveying his message? Plato offers little hope that he will. For the answer we must turn to Socrates who, despite losing his life to the cave-dwellers, was able to communicate with some. What did Socrates do, start off talking about a higher level of reality? Of course not. He met his interlocutors where they were, often using agricultural analogies and references to Greek culture commonly known at the time. He then gradually led them from what they knew or thought they knew to higher knowledge.

The example of Socrates makes clear that one must not only return to the cave but learn to see the shadows again in order to tell the prisoners about the world outside in terms of the shadows. They are unlikely to understand or listen if the message is delivered any other way.