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Philosophy and Popular Culture:

A Philosopher Seeks Value in *The Simpsons*

by Aeon J. Skoble



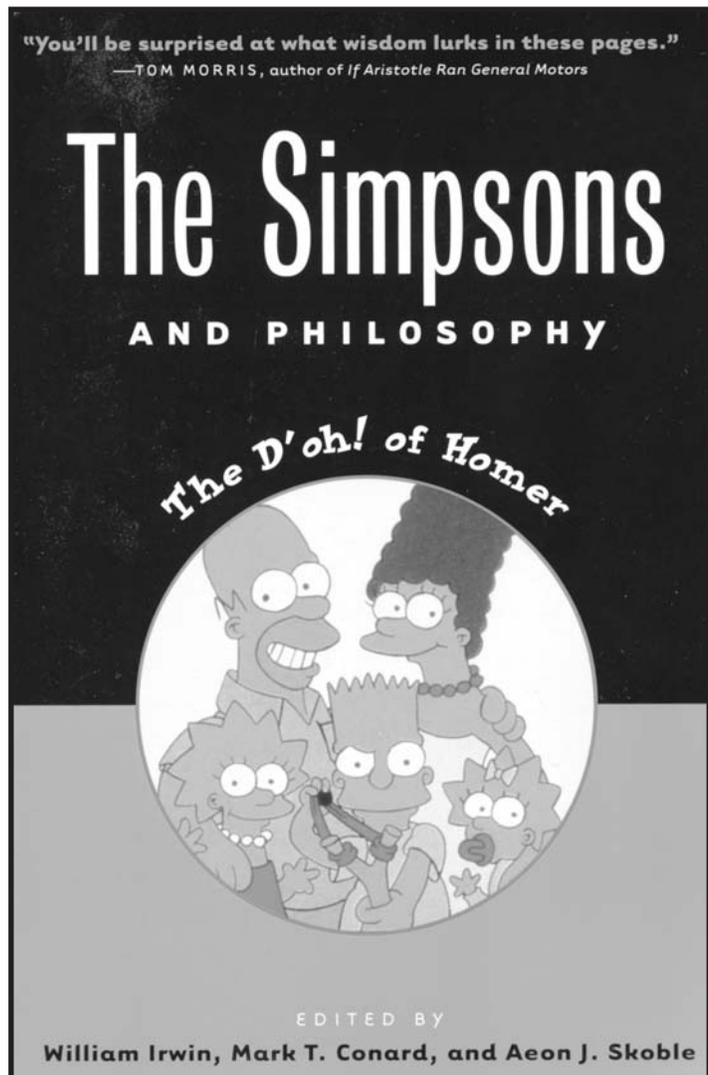
Photograph by Greg Thomas

What possible value to philosophy is popular culture? That question is put to me as often by non-philosophers as by philosophers, but for the most part it is academics and intellectuals who ask it. Non-academics tend to ask the opposite question: what relevance to popular culture is philosophy? As a co-editor of philosophical books on the television program *The Simpsons* and on the films of Woody Allen, and a contributor to similar volumes on J.R.R. Tolkien and on the television program *Seinfeld*, I need to have an answer for these questions.

There are different ways of connecting philosophy to popular culture. One way is to act as though popular culture objects are no different from high-culture objects, and thus are equally profound. After all, the argument goes, Shakespeare and Sophocles were “popular culture” in their day. So if these great dramas are fit subjects for philosophical analysis, why not a Top-40 song or a sit-com? But this argument is weak. The mere fact that some popular-culture artifacts come to be considered high-culture doesn’t entail that all of them could be. More to the point, not all popular-culture objects are sufficiently interesting to lend themselves to philosophical discussion.

I favor a different approach. Since some objects from the popular culture have greater depth than others, they are better vehicles for motivating philosophical thinking, especially among people who might not otherwise consider such questions. So one answer to the question about the value of popular culture to philosophy is that philosophers can sometimes use popular culture objects to encourage interest in philosophy. In general, the arts are frequently invoked by philosophers as examples or illustrations of attitudes, consequences, or dilemmas. The point of doing so is typically as a short cut to getting students or readers to conceptualize a problem. The best works of high art are perfectly suited to serve this need, as it is frequently their grappling with such mat-

ters that makes them excellent in the first place. One is hard pressed to find a more compelling and dramatic investigation of the theme of law versus civil disobedience than Sophocles’ “Antigone.” Shakespeare’s “Henry V” is perfect for discussions of the tenets of Just-War theory. Ibsen’s dramas offer endless inquiry into themes of conformity and integrity. Hemingway, Beethoven, Aeschylus, Camus—the list goes on and on. It’s plain



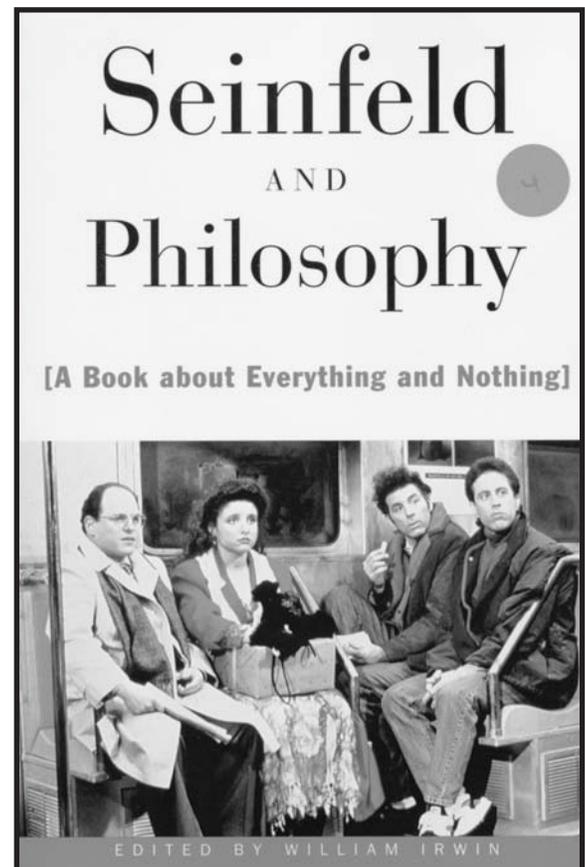
enough that the arts are of tremendous value to philosophy, in terms of the ways in which artists can prompt contemplation of philosophical problems in a way that is different from the discursive style of philosophical argumentation. But philosophers' ability to appeal to the arts is limited by the audience's familiarity with the arts. Sad as it is, any reference I might make in class to Ibsen these days would be a complete waste of time. But popular culture has the advantage of being, well, popular. For every one student who might recognize a Sophocles reference, a hundred will recognize a reference to *The Simpsons*. Recognizing that fact and trying to find ways to take advantage of it doesn't entail that sit-coms are "just as good" as our best dramas. In terms of finding ways to generate consideration of philosophical questions where it otherwise would not occur, there's no getting around the appeal of popular films and television programs. That's one way to establish a common language with students, and indeed with non-specialists generally. To whatever extent high art is valuable for communicating, or motivating interest in, ideas, popular art can not only serve the same goal, but to a broader base.

The Simpsons, as it happens, is rich in satire, unquestionably one of the most intelligently written shows on television. Satire is always an excellent vehicle for motivating thought and discussion, through its ability to mock and exaggerate. An animated, weekly, sit-com-format satire is all the more versatile in this regard, but the satire of live-action comedies such as *Seinfeld* is also effective. In *Seinfeld*, the lead characters' frequent deliberations about what should be done in certain situations has been profitably mined as a catalogue of different schools of ethics. (Popular dramas, of course, can also be effective vehicles for exploring philosophical problems. More than one episode of *Law and Order*, for instance, has offered avenues for consideration of the nature of evil, and corollary problems of free will and responsibility.) Not every television program effectively communicates philosophy—not even every good program. Some comedies are funny without having much in the way of *philosophical* substance. The many layers of satire, irony, and self-reference that we find in *The Simpsons* is what enables it to serve this communicative function.

For example, it is fair to say that American society is conflicted about intellectuals. Respect for them seems virtually to go hand in hand with resentment. This is a puzzling social problem, and also one of great importance, for we sometimes seem to be on the verge of a

new "dark ages," where not only the notion of expertise, but all standards of rationality are being challenged. This clearly has significant social consequences, and is an issue well worth exploring. I have argued that *The Simpsons* skillfully illustrates this American ambivalence about expertise and rationality. Homer, the father, is a classic example of an anti-intellectual dolt, as are most of his acquaintances, and his son Bart. But his daughter, Lisa, is not only pro-intellectual, she is smart beyond her years. She is extremely intelligent and sophisticated, and is often seen out-thinking those around her. Naturally, for this she is mocked by the other children at school and generally ignored by the adults. On the other hand, her favorite TV show is the same one as her brother's: a mindlessly violent cartoon. Her treatment on the show, I argue, captures the love-hate relationship American society has with intellectuals in a clear enough way to facilitate thought and discussion.

One might respond that this is a poor example, since only intellectuals worry about the problem of anti-intellectualism. But the ambivalence I note is a real concern for all, as illustrated clearly by Jonathan Swift's parable of the—wait, only three percent of students have read Swift—ok, as illustrated clearly by the *Simpsons* episode in which Lisa and the other intellectu-



als take over the town. In this episode, Lisa joins the local chapter of Mensa, which already includes Professor Frink, Dr. Hibbert, and Comic Book Guy. Together they end up in charge of Springfield. Lisa rhapsodizes about the rule of the intellectuals, a true rationalist utopia, but too many of their programs alienate the regular citizens of the town (including, of course, Homer, who leads the charge of the idiot brigade). It would be easy enough to see this sequence of events as a satire on the way the average person is too stupid to recognize the rule of the wise, but more than that is being satirized here. Also under attack is the very notion of rule of the wise—the Mensans have some legitimately good ideas (more rational traffic patterns), but also some ridiculous ones (censorship, mating rituals inspired by *Star Trek*), and they squabble amongst themselves. The Mensans offer something of value, especially in contrast to the corrupt regime of Mayor Quimby or the reign of idiocy that Homer represents, and Lisa's intentions are good, but it is impossible to see this episode as unequivocally pro-intellectual, since one theme is clearly that utopian schemes by elites are unstable, inevitably unpopular, and sometimes foolish. But neither is it anti-intellectual, since we are clearly not meant to favor an irrational mob rule as the only alternative to rationalist elitism. Pure majoritarianism is as arbitrary, and potentially tyrannical as Lisa's philosopher-kings would have been. What a lucid exposition of the fundamental problem of democracy this pop culture artifact turned out to be!

It is actually true, I suspect, that utopian schemes by elites tend to be ill-conceived, or are power-grabbing schemes masquerading as the common good. But it is actually not the case that the only alternatives are mob rule or oligarchy. The framers of the United States Constitution hoped to combine democratic principles (a Congress) with some of the benefits of an undemocratic elite rule (a Senate, a Supreme Court, a Bill of Rights). This has had mixed results, but in contrast to other alternatives seems to have fared well. Is all of our society's ambivalence about intellectuals due to this constitutional tension? Surely not. That is part of it, but more likely than not, this ambivalence is a manifestation of deeper psychological conflicts. We want to have authoritative guidance, but we also want autonomy. We don't like feeling stupid, yet when we are honest we realize we need to learn some things. We respect the accomplishments of others, but sometimes feel threat-

ened and resentful. We have a respect for authorities when it suits us, and embrace relativism in other cases. The "we" here is, of course, a generalization: some people manifest this conflict less than others (or in a few cases not at all), but it seems an apt description of a general social outlook. Unsurprisingly, *The Simpsons*, our most profoundly satirical TV show, both illustrates and instantiates it.

Other issues that have been fruitfully explored in *The Simpsons* include the role of the family, women's roles, religion and society, frameworks for ethical discourse, thought and language, artificial intelligence. Other popular culture artifacts offer similar opportunities for motivating exploration of profound issues. *The Matrix*, for example, is a popular science-fiction film which uses a classic philosophical theme about the nature of reality and the basis for our knowledge claims. *The Lord of the Rings*, first a popular novel and now a popular film, enables exploration of issues ranging from moral corruption to environmental ethics. Is every popular book, movie, and television program equally worthwhile in this regard? Hardly. Are they the equivalent of history's best works of literature, deeply profound in a way that illuminates the human condition as never before? Rarely. But they may sometimes be just deep enough, or funny enough, to warrant serious attention, and the mere fact of their popularity means that they can effectively help us here in the academy reach both our students and those outside the academy, encouraging them to consider, at least briefly, though hopefully thoroughly, the things we find of vital importance.

—Aeon J. Skoble is Assistant Professor of Philosophy