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Philosophy and Popular Culture: A Philosopher Seeks Value in The Simpsons

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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 programs *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 to consider them valuable in the same way. At the time, I was a television producer, and I believe that the public was more interested in this perspective than in the one I eventually embraced. The idea that the work of high art is better than that of popular culture was, I believe, a false one.

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, and this is true of many popular culture objects. The best works of high art are perfectly suited to serve this need, as it is frequently their grappling with such matters as conformity and integrity. Hemingway, Beethoven, Aeschylus, Camus—the list goes on and on. It’s plain that these works are valuable to philosophy.

It’s important sometimes to reflect on how we live in the United States compared to the rest of the world, especially those countries of the less developed world. It is not enough to state that we are rich and they are poor or that we are “advanced” and they are “developed.” Being an American in the global economy means that our wealth and power come at a price, particularly an energy and environmental price. A little data may help drive this point across. The United States has about 290 million people, or 5% of the world’s population, but we consume 22% of fossil fuels and we generate 24% of carbon dioxide emissions, the key contributor to global warming. Furthermore, an average American uses 165 gallons of water a day, a figure that only means something when compared to the 8 gallons of water a day that are used by a resident of Senegal. And when it comes to plain old overkill, an American consumes about 5 times more goods and services than a resident of China.

One common defense of these excesses and disparities is that the United States is the world’s most developed nation and as a result consumes more as it creates wealth, fosters innovation, and provides for the general welfare of its citizens. But there is a contrary view. Becoming the world’s most powerful country, the United States has built its wealth upon a foundation of consumer greed and corporate irresponsibility. Americans are not just satisfied with having all the latest consumer “stuff” they have to have all the biggest, energy-draining, environmentally dangerous “stuff.” From gigantic SUVs to golf courses on the desert to oversized mansions to throwaway diapers, beer cans, and paper plates, the American economic culture is one huge consumer machine with a thirst that is unquenchable.

It should come as no surprise that the United States gobbles up the world’s resources in order to enhance its economic standing, after all ours is a market-based system that responds to consumer demand and private wealth accumulation. The United States has not become the wealthiest country in the world because it has been reluctant to transform the resources on this planet into everything from computer chips to potato chips. The defenders of American energy use hold firm to the belief that our future as the world’s great superpower depends on a continuation of full-scale energy use. The 1990s were the golden years of consumer consumption in the United States. We lived well and enjoyed the benefits of residing in the wealthiest country in the world. But now in the 21st century it is time to think about a consumer diet and stopping the machine from eating away our future.

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—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review

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**Editor’s Notebook**

Keeping the Home Fires Burning

by Michael Kryzanek

Photograph by Greg Thomas

It’s important sometimes to reflect on how we live in the United States compared to the rest of the world, especially those countries of the less developed world. It is not enough to state that we are rich and they are poor or that we are “advanced” and they are “developed.” Being an American in the global economy means that our wealth and power come at a price, particularly an energy and environmental price. A little data may help drive this point across. The United States has about 290 million people, or 5% of the world’s population, but we consume 22% of fossil fuels and we generate 24% of carbon dioxide emissions, the key contributor to global warming. Furthermore, an average American uses 165 gallons of water a day, a figure that only means something when compared to the 8 gallons of water a day that are used by a resident of Senegal. And when it comes to plain old overkill, an American consumes about 5 times more goods and services than a resident of China.

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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 Sisyphus 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 exploration of profound issues. The Simpsons skillfully illustrates this American ambivalence about expertise and rationality. Homer, the father, is a classic example of an anti-intellectual idiot, 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 Simpson episode in which Lisa and the other intellectuals 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 shad-ows about the role 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 rec-ognize the role of the wise, but more than that is being satirized here. Also under attack is the very notion of rule of the wise—the Mensa has some legitimately good ideas (more rational traffic patterns), but also some ridiculous ones (censorship, mating rituals inspired by Star Trek), and they squabble amongst them-selves. The Mensa offers something of value, especial-ly in contrast to the corrupt regime of Mayor Quimby or the reign of idocy 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 rational elites. Pure majoritarianism is as arbitrary, and potentially tyrannical as Lisa’s philoso-pher-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 soci-ety’s ambivalence about intellectuals due to this consti-tutional tension? Surely not. That is part of it, but more likely than not, this ambivalence is a manifesta-tion 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-
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 exploration of profound issues. In this regard, *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* has offered avenues for consideration of the nature of evil, and corollary problems of free will and responsibility.)

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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. In every popular book, movie, and television program equally worthwhile in this regard—Hardly. Are they the equivalent of history’s best works of literature, deep enough 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