

SERIES EDITOR: WILLIAM IRWIN
EDITED BY: CATHERINE M. ROBB
AND GEORGIE MILLS



TAYLOR SWIFT

and
Philosophy

THE BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

This book has not been approved, licensed, or sponsored by any entity or person involved in creating or producing *Taylor Swift* products or works.

TAYLOR SWIFT AND PHILOSOPHY

The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series

Series editor: *William Irwin*

A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, and a healthy helping of popular culture clears the cobwebs from Kant. Philosophy has had a public relations problem for a few centuries now. This series aims to change that, showing that philosophy is relevant to your life—and not just for answering the big questions like “To be or not to be?” but for answering the little questions: “To watch or not to watch South Park?” Thinking deeply about TV, movies, and music doesn’t make you a “complete idiot.” In fact, it might make you a philosopher, someone who believes the unexamined life is not worth living and the unexamined cartoon is not worth watching.

Already published in the series:

Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I Am
Edited by Jeffery A. Ewing and Kevin S. Decker

Avatar: The Last Airbender and Philosophy
Edited by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt

Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul
Edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp

**The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy:
Rock, Paper, Scissors, Aristotle, Locke**
Edited by Dean A. Kowalski

**BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game,
Rational Book**
Edited by Luke Cuddy

Black Mirror and Philosophy
Edited by David Kyle Johnson

Black Panther and Philosophy
Edited by Eduardo Pérez and Timothy Brown

**Disney and Philosophy: Truth, Trust, and a Little Bit
of Pixie Dust**
Edited by Richard B. Davis

Dune and Philosophy
Edited by Kevin S. Decker

**Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Read and
Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks**
Edited by Christopher Robichaud

**Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper
Than Swords**
Edited by Henry Jacoby

The Good Place and Philosophy: Everything is Fine!
Edited by Kimberly S. Engels

Star Wars and Philosophy Strikes Back
Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

**The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy:
Hogwarts for Muggles**
Edited by Gregory Bassham

**The Hobbit and Philosophy: For When You’ve Lost
Your Dwarfes, Your Wizard, and Your Way**
Edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson

**Inception and Philosophy: Because It’s Never
Just a Dream**
Edited by David Kyle Johnson

**LEGO and Philosophy: Constructing Reality
Brick By Brick**

Edited by Roy T. Cook and Sondra Bacharach

**Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in
Brain Surgery**

Edited by William Irwin

**The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy:
Respect My Philosophah!**

Edited by Robert Arp and Kevin S. Decker

**The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy:
The Search for Socrates**

Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

**The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy:
You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned**
Edited by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker

Terminator and Philosophy: I’ll Be Back, Therefore I Am
Edited by Richard Brown and Kevin S. Decker

Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test
Edited by Mark D. White

**Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking
for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing**
Edited by James B. South and Kimberly S. Engels

Ted Lasso and Philosophy
Edited by Marybeth Baggett and David Baggett

Mad Max and Philosophy
Edited by Matthew P. Meyer and David Koepsell

**Taylor Swift and Philosophy: Essays from the Tortured
Philosophers Department**
Edited by Catherine M. Robb and Georgie Mills

Joker and Philosophy
*Edited by Massimiliano L. Cappuccio, George A. Dunn,
and Jason T. Eberl*

The Witcher and Philosophy
Edited by Matthew Brake and Kevin S. Decker

The Last of Us and Philosophy
Edited by Charles Joshua Horn

For the full list of titles in the series see
www.andphilosophy.com

**TAYLOR SWIFT
AND PHILOSOPHY
ESSAYS FROM THE
TORTURED PHILOSOPHERS
DEPARTMENT**

Edited by

**Catherine M. Robb
Georgie Mills**

WILEY Blackwell

Copyright © 2025 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Robb, Catherine M., editor. | Mills, Georgie, editor.

Title: Taylor Swift and philosophy: Essays from the Tortured Philosophers Department / edited by Georgie Mills, Catherine M. Robb.

Description: Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024014116 (print) | LCCN 2024014117 (ebook) | ISBN 9781394238590 (paperback) | ISBN 9781394238613 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781394238606 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Swift, Taylor, 1989—Philosophy. | Swift, Taylor, 1989—Criticism and interpretation. | Music and philosophy.

Classification: LCC ML420.S968 T38 2024 (print) | LCC ML420.S968 (ebook) | DDC 782.421642092—dc23/eng/20240405

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024014116>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024014117>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Images: © Eleonora Grigorjeva/Getty Images, © ChiccoDodiFC/Getty Images, © chachamp/Adobe Stock

Set in 10/12pt SabonLTStd by Straive, Pondicherry, India

Contents

Contributors	viii
Introducing ... Taylor Swift's Philosophy Era <i>Catherine M. Robb and Georgie Mills</i>	xiv
“Who Is Taylor Swift Anyway? Ew”	1
1 Is Taylor Swift a Philosopher? <i>Catherine M. Robb</i>	3
2 “You Should Find Another Guiding Light”: Is Taylor Swift Admirable? <i>Kate C.S. Schmidt</i>	12
3 Eyes Open: Taylor Swift and the Philosophy of Easter Eggs <i>Eline Kuipers</i>	19
4 Taylor Swift and the Ethics of Body Image <i>Gah-Kai Leung</i>	28
5 So Mother for That: Taylor Swift and Childless Mothering <i>Lucy Britt and Brian Britt</i>	36
“Look What You Made Me Do”: Reputation, Forgiveness, and Blame	47
6 Can I Forgive You for Breaking My Heart? <i>Sophia Pettigrove and Glen Pettigrove</i>	49
7 How to Forgive an Innocent: Taylor, Kanye, and the Ethics of Forgiveness <i>Sarah Köglspurger</i>	58
8 “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things”: Goodwill as a Finite Resource <i>Georgie Mills</i>	66

9	Taylor Swift's Philosophy of Reputation <i>Catherine M. Robb and Roos Slegers</i>	72
10	"It's Me, Hi! I'm the Problem It's Me": Taylor Swift and Self-Blame <i>Agnès Baehni</i>	81
	"The Girl in the Dress Wrote You a Song"	89
11	Begin Again (Taylor's Version): On Taylor Swift's Repetition and Difference <i>King-Ho Leung</i>	91
12	Is Taylor Swift's Music Timeless?: A Metaphysical Proof <i>Patrick Dawson</i>	99
13	"I Remember It All Too Well": Memory, Nostalgia, and the Archival Art of Songwriting <i>Rebecca Keddie</i>	107
14	Taylor's Version: Rerecording, Narrative, and Self-Interpretation <i>Jana Alvara Carstens</i>	116
	"With My Calamitous Love and Insurmountable Grief"	127
15	Taylor Swift on the Values and Vulnerability of Love <i>Macy Salzberger</i>	129
16	"Every Scrap of You Would Be Taken from Me": Taylor Swift on Grief <i>Jonathan Birch</i>	137
17	"What a Shame She Went Mad": Anger, Affective Injustice, and Taylor Swift's "mad woman" <i>Erica Bigelow</i>	147
18	I'm Fine with My Spite: The Philosophy of Female Anger in the Work of Taylor Swift <i>Amanda Cercas Curry and Alba Curry</i>	154
	"I Should've Known": Taylor Swift's Philosophy of Knowledge	163
19	"Summer Love" or "Just a Summer Thing?": Feminist Standpoint Epistemology and the <i>folklore</i> Love Triangle <i>Lottie Pike and Tom Beevers</i>	165

20	The Trouble with Knowing You Were Trouble <i>Eric Scarffe and Katherine Valde</i>	174
21	“I Knew Everything When I Was Young”: Examining the Wisdom of Youth <i>Urja Lakhani</i>	182
22	How Do We Know What Taylor Swift Is Feeling? <i>Neil Mussett</i>	189
	“Back to December”: Fate, Memory, and Imagination	199
23	A Real Lasting Legacy: Memory, Imagination, and Taylor Swift <i>Christopher Buford</i>	201
24	Stained Glass Windows in My Mind: Modality in the Imagery of Taylor Swift <i>Shoshannah Diehl</i>	208
25	“Take Me to the Lakes”: Transcendentalism and Ecology in Taylor Swift’s <i>folklore</i> <i>Joshua Fagan</i>	216
26	Wildest Dreams: Stoic Fate and Acceptance (Taylor’s Version) <i>David Hahn</i>	225
27	Mythic Motifs in <i>The Tortured Poets Department</i> : “The Story Isn’t Mine Anymore” <i>Georgie Mills</i>	231
	Index of Terms and Names	238
	Index of Taylor Swift’s Songs and Albums	241

Contributors

Agnès Baehni is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Geneva. She divides her time between moral philosophy and listening to Taylor Swift’s music, and often does both at the same time. She is currently writing a doctoral thesis on the topic of the moral relationship to the self.

Tom Beevers is eagerly awaiting an invite on tour as Swift’s traveling philosophical adviser. In the meantime, he whiles away his hours as an Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Northeastern University London. He writes on philosophy of language and epistemology, and also enjoys running and cooking (does Taylor need a chef?).

Erica Bigelow is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Washington. Her dissertation asks about our ethical obligations to others’ emotions, particularly against the backdrop of vast structural injustice. Erica is also a precollege philosophy facilitator with PLATO. She attended Taylor Swift’s infamous Gillette Stadium “rain show” in 2011, and hasn’t missed a tour since.

Jonathan Birch is Professor of Philosophy at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he is best known for his work on animal consciousness and the origins of altruism. He once confused his students by giving “a bad Taylor Swift album” as an example of something that is conceivable but not metaphysically possible.

Brian Britt is Professor of Religion and Cultural Theory in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech, where he also serves as Director of the ASPECT PhD program. He writes and teaches about biblical tradition, modern religious thought, literature, and popular culture. The present collaboration with Lucy Britt is the latest in a series of projects informed by his children, including essays on TikTok and the Teletubbies.

Lucy Britt is an Assistant Professor of Politics at Bates College, where she teaches and researches the politics of race and ethnicity, the politics of memory, and African American political theory. She also teaches feminist political theory and writes about feminism and popular culture, from Taylor Swift to trauma-dumping on *The Bachelor*. She is excited that the discourse surrounding Taylor Swift has become an opportunity to engage in critical feminist, queer, and intersectional interventions in “Swiftiedom.”

Christopher Buford is Professor of Instruction at The University of Akron. His research interests include external world skepticism, personal identity, and advance directives. When not working on philosophy, he enjoys listening to metal, jazz, and EDM. More Swiftie-adjacent than Swiftie, he does admit that the algorithms have started working Taylor’s songs into his playlists.

Jana Alvara Carstens obtained her PhD in philosophy at the University of Pretoria. She once arrogantly proclaimed that she doesn’t listen to Taylor Swift. Not long after making this statement, she borrowed a friend’s car and a 1989 CD was in the stereo. She didn’t turn down the volume. Instead, she realized she was a snob like the guy from “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together.” She wanted to contribute to this book to atone for publicly bashing Swift. Perhaps she’s also a little bit afraid of karma.

Alba Curry is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Leeds, UK. Currently her work defends the positive value of anger in ancient Chinese and Greek ethics, individually and comparatively, and its value to contemporary philosophies of emotions, feminism, and artificial intelligence. Despite having been one of those who said, “Who is Taylor Swift anyway?,” she became a fan because she loves to investigate phenomena she doesn’t immediately like (much like how she started her research on anger).

Amanda Cercas Curry is a postdoctoral researcher at MilaNLP at Bocconi University, Italy. Her research interests are broad and as a computer scientist working on AI, she loves to spend time working with philosophers. She believes that multidisciplinary approaches involving diverse teams and feminist design methods are key in solving today’s ethical and technical challenges. As a woman in STEM, she often feels she has had to prove there is more to her than meets the eye, and has found great solace in Taylor Swift’s takes on life (she even slept at an airport for her).

Patrick Dawson was, to confess, a bit of a Taylor Swift hater in his younger days. Then he got an education, traveled the world, and took up his current fellowship at University College Dublin. Now, Patrick tries to prove that the past doesn’t exist. All that’s real is the present, Swift-appreciating Patrick of today. He’s also dabbled in debate and stand-up comedy. Given

these interests in the present, and the spoken word, you'd think *Speak Now* would be his favorite album. But Patrick's more of a *folklore* guy, reflecting his other loves: nature, cardigans, and that "single thread of gold" from him to his daughter, Idun.

Shoshannah Diehl is an English instructor at Marshall University, where she uses her Swiftie abilities to teach textual analysis to the next generation. Her scholarship interests include linguistics, philosophy, sci-fi and fantasy literature, and deciphering the difference between Quill Lyrics, Fountain Pen Lyrics, and Glitter Gel Pen Lyrics. She spends her spare time writing fiction and cultivating the persona of an argumentative, antithetical dream girl.

Joshua Fagan is a graduate student at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Like Taylor Swift, he fantasizes about disappearing into the greenery of the Lake District and never returning. When not debating whether *folklore* is better than *evermore*, he specializes in nineteenth-century British and American literature, with a particular focus on the intersection of literature and science in response to the upheaval and malaise created by industrialization.

David Hahn is an adjunct at SUNY Geneseo. He has been called Treacherous, Trouble, and an Anti-Hero; but rarely because of his Dress. If you have a Getaway Car, he knows places in Buffalo NY where he can see you standing in Snow on the Beach.

Rebecca Keddie works as an archivist, and recently graduated with an MA in archives and record management. Her master's dissertation looked at how place can function as archive and was inspired by her obsession with Taylor Swift's song "Cornelia Street." Post-graduation, she's put her degree to good use by continuing to relate it back to Taylor Swift, as with just about everything else in her life.

Sarah Köglsperger is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Fribourg. When she was young and reckless, studying philosophy at LMU Munich, she was immediately enchanted with Taylor Swift's music. Currently, Sarah is working on the influence of personal relationships on blame and forgiveness. She enjoys listening to Taylor Swift's songs, as they vividly capture the intricate nature of relationships and the moral challenges they may pose. Now midnights become her afternoons, as she writes her dissertation while her cat is purring in her lap 'cause it loves her.

Eline Kuipers is a PhD candidate in philosophy of mind at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, as well as a long-time Swiftie. For her dissertation, she gives her blood, sweat, and tears to investigate how we plan, control, and

execute our actions. In her free time, she loves to make sparkling friendship bracelets, cuddle with her red cat and bearded dragon, have the time of her life in theme parks with her partner in crime, annoy her friends with marvelous Easter egg interpretations, and proudly sing Taylor Swift songs as if she was the loudest woman the town has ever seen.

Urja Lakhani recently completed her graduate education in philosophy from Birkbeck, University of London. Her research is focused on political epistemology and feminist philosophy. Currently working as a policy analyst, Urja also serves on the editorial board of *The Philosopher*, the UK's longest-running public philosophy journal. Urja has been a lifelong Swiftie. Her childhood in India was accompanied by the sounds of Taylor Swift's earlier albums. Despite never owning a guitar, she found herself shedding tears over teenage heartaches to the tunes of "Teardrops on My Guitar." Later, she moved to New York, where the bright lights never blinded her. Now, she resides in London with her own London boy.

Gah-Kai Leung is a PhD candidate in the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, UK. Like Taylor Swift's back catalogue, his philosophical interests are wide and eclectic, including social and political philosophy, applied ethics, the philosophy of social science, and the philosophy of art. His current karaoke song of choice is "Anti-Hero" and someday he hopes to be just as talented at lip syncing as Emma Stone, only with Swift songs rather than tracks by DJ Khaled.

King-Ho Leung is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Theology, Philosophy, and the Arts at King's College London, UK. The lingering questions that keep him up—and sometimes wonderstruck—include the relation between philosophy and religion, what it means to exist spiritually or authentically, and whether Taylor Swift will ever return to writing pop-country ballads.

Georgie Mills is a philosopher, nap enthusiast, and songwriter living in the Netherlands. Her philosophical work spans topics such as personality, emotion, disability, fandom, and punk rock. She has been furious with Taylor Swift since a sixteen-year-old Georgie heard the first album of a sixteen-year-old Swift, and she couldn't believe someone her own age had the audacity to be such an accomplished songwriter. Her fandom has Swiftly increased with each subsequent album release. She lives in hope that one day beaded bodysuits will count as acceptable work attire for philosophers as well as pop superstars.

Neil Mussett has written philosophy and pop culture chapters on *Spider-Man*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *The X-Files*, so obviously his life gravitates toward being edgy, sexy, and cool. This did not earn him any points

with his daughters Ausra and Ollie or niece Christina, so he jumped at the chance to write about our common love of Taylor Swift. Neil is frustrated that the CIA is getting credit for all the work he has put into making sure that Taylor's boyfriend Travis made it to the Super Bowl.

Glen Pettigrove is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. According to Spotify, he spent more time listening to Taylor Swift's music in 2023 than 96 percent of UK listeners. Even so, he cannot compete with his daughters, one of whom was in the top 2 percent and the other in the top 1 percent of listeners. He has published a book, two edited collections, and more than forty papers on philosophical topics, but this is the first time he's gotten to co-author something with one of his children. He is already looking forward to the next time.

Sophia Pettigrove is a philosophy student at the University of Glasgow. Both philosophy and Taylor Swift have been central elements of her life since she was a child, the former due to her father's influence, the latter due to impeccable taste. She is very excited to have convinced her father to write a paper on Taylor Swift with her, and even more excited to share it with other fans.

Lottie Pike is a third-year undergraduate student studying Philosophy with Art History at Northeastern University London. Lottie is the co-chair of POLIS, an inter-university network for philosophy students across London, and is also the President of her university's Philosophy Society. She loves philosophy *almost* as much as she loves Taylor Swift, and has been searching for a way to combine the two. She hopes to pursue a career in academia, with a focus on the intersection between the philosophy of mind and art.

Catherine M. Robb is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tilburg University, Netherlands. She was born in the same year as Taylor Swift, so naturally *1989 (Taylor's Version)* is her favorite album, with "Out of the Woods (Taylor's Version)" often played on repeat. She has happy memories of dancing around the room with her dad to "Shake It Off," and listening to *folklore* during the hard times of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Macy Salzberger is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University. Like Swift, she often writes about relationships and their dynamics. On occasion, she dabbles in songwriting and performance to serenade her dog, Benny (whose favorite Swift song is "Shake It Off").

Eric Scarffe is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Florida International University, and earned his PhD in philosophy from Boston University in 2020. He believes that philosophy is not something reserved for academic

journals and university classrooms, but is found everywhere. An avid bar-room defender of the thesis that Taylor Swift is as thoughtful a poet as Bob Dylan, the number one song on his Spotify for the past year has been “marjorie.”

Kate C.S. Schmidt is happily “living in a big old city,” working at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Being an Associate Professor of Philosophy can be “miserable and magical,” but she keeps “cruising,” just like Taylor Swift. It is pretty standard at her house to “leave the Christmas lights up until January.”

Roos Slegers is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tilburg University, Netherlands. She is interested in themes at the intersection between philosophy, literature and (pop) culture. One of her research projects focuses on eighteenth-century conceptions of vanity, and another on the philosophical importance of fantasy and science-fiction stories about cyborgs. Roos struggled to find a way to unite these two projects until she saw Taylor’s video for “... Ready for It” and now has no further questions.

Katherine Valde is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She received her PhD in philosophy from Boston University in 2019. As a proud millennial, and just a few months Swift’s junior, Katherine has grown up with Swift (and listening to Swift’s music). Lately she’s been jamming in the *Midnights* (2022) era, and her favorite track is “Karma.”

Introducing ... Taylor Swift's Philosophy Era

Catherine M. Robb and Georgie Mills

What if we told you Taylor Swift was a mastermind? Not just when it comes to being “cryptic” and “Machiavellian” in relationships, as she tells us in *Midnights*. And she’s not just a musical mastermind, with her record-breaking songwriting and international stadium tours. Taylor is also a *philosophical* mastermind. Since the release of her debut album, Taylor has been writing about themes, ideas, and questions that have kept philosophers busy for millennia.

Have you ever wondered whether you should forgive your ex for breaking up with you, or why your reputation is so important? Have you ever wondered what is so threatening about an angry woman, or whether you really know nothing when you’re seventeen? Have you ever considered why Taylor’s “Easter eggs” are so fascinating? Or what you would do if you found yourself on an imaginary Christmas tree farm? Have you ever asked yourself what it means to go back to December, or love someone in August? These are all philosophical questions that touch on the nature of heartbreak, forgiveness, time, love, imagination and memory, emotion, feminism, and knowledge.

In this book, we’ve assembled a team of Swifties who also happen to be philosophy professors and scholars, proving that philosophy isn’t just for bespectacled old men behind ivy-covered walls. A philosopher can also be a bejeweled young woman with a guitar and talent for writing lyrics, or anyone who lives their life with curiosity and reflection. With the help of Taylor’s lyrics, interviews, and speeches, we will delve into the philosophy that is scattered throughout her discography, like the Easter eggs that she loves to hide. Together we can take pride in the wisdom that comes from Taylor’s songs and the ideas that they inspire in you.

Taylor has declared herself to be the “Chairman of the Tortured Poets Department.” But with this book a new Era is dawning—Taylor is now in her “Philosophy Era.” In fact, as the pages ahead will show, Taylor and her fans have been in this Era all along. It is only fitting then that we now declare Taylor Swift the honorary Chairman of the “Tortured Philosophers Department.”

**“WHO IS TAYLOR SWIFT
ANYWAY? EW”**

Is Taylor Swift a Philosopher?

Catherine M. Robb

After being awarded an honorary doctorate by New York University (NYU) in 2022, Taylor Swift gave a commencement speech for the graduates. During her speech Taylor spoke of the exciting challenge of figuring out who we are and who we want to be: "... we are so many things, all the time. And I know it can be really overwhelming figuring out who to be, and when."¹ Taylor tells us that we all play different roles, and our identity is not defined by just one of them. Taylor, for example, is not only a singer and songwriter, but also a film director, actress, celebrity, honorary academic doctor, and the self-appointed Chair of the "Tortured Poets Department."²

Many cultural commentators have added the role of "philosopher" to the list that defines Taylor. The journalists Kayla Bartsch, Peter M. Juul, and Clare McCarthy have all claimed or reported that Taylor is a philosopher.³ Scott Hershovitz, a philosopher and writer for the *New York Times*, has claimed that Taylor is a philosopher of "forgiveness,"⁴ and others have stated that Taylor has a philosophy of "writing,"⁵ "dating,"⁶ and "music."⁷

Although Taylor has spoken openly about many aspects of her life, and has also name-dropped the ancient philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in *The Tortured Poets Department* ("So High School"), as far as we know she has never called herself or identified as a philosopher. Taylor's music, career, and life as a celebrity are philosophically interesting, raising philosophical questions that are worthy of further discussion and exploration. But it is a much stronger claim to say that Taylor is, herself, a philosopher. So, how can we decide if Taylor really is a philosopher?

The Answer Is Not That Simple

You might think that the answer to this question is easy—all we need to do is figure out what being a philosopher is or what philosophers do, and then see if Taylor fits this description. So, how do we define what it is to be a philosopher? It seems obvious that philosophers do philosophy, and so if Taylor is doing philosophy then she is a philosopher, and if not, then she's not a philosopher—simple, right? Well, as you've probably guessed given the number of pages left in this chapter, finding a definition of what

philosophy is and what philosophers do is not that simple. Philosophers disagree about this so much that some even think it is impossible or useless to define what philosophy is.⁸ There are good reasons for this difficulty.

First, philosophy is difficult to define because it is pluralistic—hard to pin down as being about just one thing. It is possible to study the philosophy of almost anything, including many of the themes that Taylor explores in her lyrics, such as friendship, love, heartbreak, gender, reputation, and knowledge. The way that we can *do* philosophy is also highly varied. Some philosophers will approach a particular topic, like heartbreak, by focusing on how it is experienced from a first-person point of view, and others will try to define heartbreak as accurately and consistently as possible. Still other philosophers might do philosophy by considering the role that heartbreak plays in our well-being and interactions with others, and some might analyze how heartbreak is felt differently depending on one's gender. All these methods count as philosophy.

It is so difficult to pin philosophy down as being about just one thing or method because making decisions about the *right* way to do philosophy is itself a philosophical issue.⁹ After all, we can do philosophy of anything—even of philosophy itself. Because philosophers have different theories, ideas, and arguments about what philosophy is, answers to the question, “What is philosophy?” are hotly debated and controversial. If it is just a part of philosophy that we cannot agree about what it is, then how can we figure out whether Taylor is a philosopher?

Life Hacks and Embracing Cringe

One way to get out of this stalemate is to forget that professional philosophers argue about what philosophy is, and just use the everyday understanding of philosophy that most people agree on. One popular assumption about philosophy is that it consists in words of wisdom, guiding principles, and values that provide advice about how to live and what to do.¹⁰ If you've ever given anyone general life advice—“never go to sleep angry” or “never trust someone who lets you down twice”—then on this definition you are a philosopher.

This way of understanding what philosophy is certainly makes Taylor Swift a philosopher. All of her albums include song lyrics scattered with pieces of wisdom and guiding principles for how to live and what to do. Beginning with her debut album, Taylor gives us wisdom about how to deal with an uncertain future (“A Place in This World”), and advice against cheating on your partner and asking for forgiveness retrospectively (“Should've Said No”). Fast forward eighteen years to the release of *The Tortured Poets Department*, and Taylor continues to impart philosophical wisdom. In “The Black Dog” she tells us how hard it is to give up old habits (they “die screaming”), and in “I Can Do It With a Broken Heart”

she explains that you know you're good at your job "when you can even do it / With a broken heart."

Taylor has also expressed her philosophical views in interviews and speeches. In her 2023 *TIME* Person of the Year interview, she supplies wisdom on how to deal with our enemies, recommends that we take time to celebrate ourselves in the present, and reminds us that "Life is short."¹¹ In her 2022 NYU commencement speech, Taylor shares a number of "life hacks" that she hopes will be helpful to us "navigating life, love, pressure, choices, shame, hope and friendship."¹² If we take a "life hack" to be the same as a piece of wisdom about how to live a good life, then we can see Taylor as offering us quite a few pieces of philosophical wisdom. She tells us that we ought to embrace cringe, embrace the mistakes that we've made because these often lead to the best things in our lives, and leaves us with a message of resilience and empowerment: "... hard things will happen to us. We will recover. We will learn from it. We will grow more resilient because of it." One of my favorite guiding principles that Taylor has shared came after the Superbowl game in 2024, when she told Travis Kelce that "jet lag is a choice."¹³

And so, if philosophy is defined as being able to articulate and live by guiding principles and pieces of wisdom, offering life hacks and suggestions for how to live a good life, then Taylor is definitely a philosopher. This is also what some journalists and media reports have in mind when they claim that Taylor is a philosopher, because her lyrics contain "words of wisdom" and "valuable life lessons,"¹⁴ because she reminds us "of the things that truly matter in life,"¹⁵ and "offers genuine insight."¹⁶

Unsolicited Advice

There is a problem, though, with labeling Taylor as a philosopher in this way. If philosophy just means sharing words of wisdom, then not only is Taylor a philosopher but so is almost everyone else. I'm sure we've all been at the receiving end of unsolicited advice given to us by friends and family, co-workers, taxi drivers, people standing in line next to us at the store or coffee-house, or even people sitting next to us on public transport. All these people too would have to count as philosophers. This just seems implausible—as the contemporary philosopher Edward Craig has claimed, understanding philosophy in this way means it is "so broad as to be close to meaningless."¹⁷ There must be something more that Taylor does if she is a philosopher.

Philosophy has to do with how we critically reflect on and scrutinize our beliefs, figuring out whether they stand the test of time. As philosopher Julian Baggini writes, doing philosophy is not blindly accepting a piece of wisdom, but involves a "systematic investigation of the nature of the world"—this entails providing reasons for our ideas and beliefs that can be

“scrutinized, judged, assessed, accepted or rejected.”¹⁸ It is not enough to just state your life hack; you must also provide a systematic or methodical way of critically reflecting on it, considering more carefully how you arrived at your belief, and providing reasons to support your view. Taylor has given us many different life hacks throughout the years, but does she critically reflect and methodically scrutinize these life hacks, giving us reasons for why we ought to believe them?

Simple Existential Questions

Contemporary philosophers have already begun to do this critical reflection on Taylor’s behalf, taking her views on topics she’s written about in her lyrics, and highlighting how these touch on already-existing philosophical ideas and questions. For example, Keshav Singh has shown how Taylor’s lyrics about the relationship between love and madness track the different theories of historical philosophers such as Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Plato (c. 427–347 BCE).¹⁹ Luke Russell highlights the philosophical assumptions that Taylor makes about forgiveness, clarifying these ideas and asking us further questions to reflect on.²⁰ And Lindsay Brainard has offered a philosophical analysis of “Champagne Problems” as a way to think more critically about the ethics of making good decisions.²¹

In these examples the philosophers are the ones doing the heavy lifting when it comes to the critical reflection and scrutiny of the ideas that Taylor expresses in her lyrics. This only goes to show that Swift is being *philosophical*—offering up ideas, thoughts, and questions that have the potential to be philosophically analyzed by “real” philosophers. Maybe this isn’t such a problem. Taylor herself acknowledges that some of her lyrics are philosophical. When describing the chorus of “Lover” she says, “I wanted the chorus to be these really simply existential questions that we ask ourselves when we’re in love.”²² Here, Taylor expresses the philosophical idea that being in love alters our identity and sense of who we are. Stating this idea is certainly philosophical. But on the definition of philosophy we’ve been exploring, to be a philosopher Swift would need to critically reflect on and provide a methodical analysis of the reasons for believing the idea. But who is to say that Taylor *does not* critically reflect on the pieces of wisdom and philosophical questions she raises in her lyrics, interviews, and speeches?

A Narrow Operation

The philosopher Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) claimed that because philosophy involves “the critical analysis of beliefs,” it must be “discursive” (providing reasons and justification for the claims that you make), “direct”

(clearly and explicitly getting to the point), and “abstract” (only dealing with general theories and ideas rather than particular personal experiences).²³ And as the contemporary philosopher Susan L. Anderson has summarized, according to the standard idea of philosophical method, we do philosophy when we express our “views as clearly as possible, in an unemotional fashion, defending them with arguments, defining crucial terms, and considering all possible objections to one’s view.”²⁴ This would mean that only a limited selection of texts would count as philosophy, usually only written by those who are trained in university philosophy departments and publish in professional philosophy journals. Songs definitely would not count.

However, this concept of philosophy is too narrow and restrictive. Many famous philosophers were not philosophy professors or even students in philosophy departments, such as René Descartes (1596–1650) who studied law and mathematics, and David Hume (1711–1776) who studied Latin and Greek. And many well-respected works of philosophy take other forms than a direct and abstract piece of writing—for example Plato’s famous dialogues, Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1797–1851) letters, or the way in which African philosophers have used oral traditions to pass down their work without the use of a written text at all. As the philosopher Edward Craig argues, to think that philosophy is a “narrow operation that only occurs in universities” is “restrictive and misleading.”²⁵ Philosophical analysis can take different forms depending on the culture and historical time period, and it is more than just an abstract written text authored by a philosophy professor at a university. So, in what way do Taylor’s songs, speeches, and other works count as philosophy?

Double Standards and Personal Experience

Taylor actually does critically analyze her life hacks, words of wisdom, and ideas. How? By reflecting on her own personal experiences and that of fictional characters. As an example, let’s take Taylor’s analysis of gender stereotypes and discrimination. In her acceptance speech as the first ever recipient of *Billboard*’s Woman of the Decade award in 2019, Taylor tells us that “people love to explain away a woman’s success.”²⁶ On its own, this would be a mere nugget of wisdom. But in that same speech, Taylor offers many different personal examples that support her statement: people claimed that her record label, male producer, or male co-writer were the reason for her success, and people accused her of lying about writing her own songs. Ultimately, Swift argues that she was held to higher standards than male artists. In an interview for *CBS News* in 2019, Taylor gives further support for her claim that women are subjected to double standards: “A man does something, it’s strategic. A woman does the same thing, it’s calculated. A man is allowed to react. A woman can only overreact.”²⁷

Throughout her discography, Taylor systematically examines the different aspects and experiences of the discrimination experienced by women—from the perspective of one’s emotions not being taken seriously (“mad woman”), double standards (“The Man”), being cast as a homewrecker (in the *folklore* love triangle), the difficult tension between being in a steady relationship and pursuing one’s own career (“Midnight Rain”), and the social pressure to have a reputation of being a “good girl” and a “dutiful daughter” (“Bejeweled” and “But Daddy I Love Him”).

Looking at Taylor’s body of work as a whole, we see that her method is to state standard stereotypes that women are subjected to, and at the same time consider how and why they ought to be subverted. For example, in “mad woman” she highlights the typical stereotype that “no one likes a mad woman,” in “Vigilante Shit” it is the fact that “Ladies” are always expected to play nice and “always rise above,” and in “Lavander Haze,” Taylor writes of the idea that women are either thought of as “a one-night stand or a “wife,” with there being no middle ground. Yet at the same time, Taylor sings of how these stereotypes ought to be challenged: “If a man talks shit, then I owe him nothing” (“I Did Something Bad”); “I’m so sick of running as fast I can / Wondering if I’d get there quicker / If I was a man” (“The Man”); “I’m damned if I do give a damn what people say / No deal, the 1950s shit they want from me” (“Lavander Haze”); and “I’ll tell you something ‘bout my good name / It’s mine alone to disgrace” (“But Daddy I Love Him”).

Rather than offering an abstract written discussion exploring the reasons for challenging each stereotype, Taylor provides an account of what it is like to *experience* these double standards, from either a personal point of view or from the point of view of an imagined character as part of a fictional narrative. In “The Man,” Taylor wonders what it would feel like for her if she was not subjected to the double standards thrown at her, and in “Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince” she sings about what it feels like for her to be labeled a “bad, bad girl.” But in “the last great american dynasty” Taylor sings of Rebekah’s experiences of being labeled as a mad, chaotic, and sad woman, and in “august” she sings of Augustine’s experiences of being cast as the “other woman.”

As Taylor explains during her *Billboard* acceptance speech, her albums are an account of how she attempts to subvert the sexist labels put on her: “Whatever they decided I couldn’t do is exactly what I did. Whatever they criticized about me became material for musical satires or inspirational anthems.”²⁸ What makes this approach powerful is that it does not analyze the sexist stereotypes from an abstract and detached point of view. The harm that these stereotypes can inflict on women is real and experienced as part of everyday life. The way women challenge these stereotypes is not theoretical, but performed by acting in ways that subvert expectations and question the status quo. This is messy, and not something that can always be abstractly and directly explained without emotional weight.

The value of Taylor's contribution to feminist philosophy is the way she uses her own personal experiences and fictional characters to explore, challenge, and subvert negative gender stereotypes that have caused harmful discrimination against woman. In doing so, Taylor doesn't merely state a life hack or piece of wisdom. Instead, she critically and systematically reflects on and critiques gender stereotypes.

The Accidental Philosopher

"But, Taylor Swift writes songs," the skeptic might proclaim, "how can this be philosophy?" Taylor isn't doing philosophy in any of the standard ways that we would teach philosophy students when they take a philosophy course in high school or university. But if doing philosophy involves critically reflecting and systematically analyzing our worldviews and beliefs, then Taylor is doing that by offering a first-personal and fictional analysis in her songs, interviews, and speeches.

The contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum claims that poetry, fiction, and storytelling can be powerful tools for philosophers to express certain philosophical truths about how to live a good life. Nussbaum argues that when Western philosophy first emerged in ancient Greece, it was the poets who were the "central ethical teachers and thinkers" because their works allowed for a "process of inquiry, reflection."²⁹ This makes sense because philosophical inquiry often requires "the perception of particular people and situations rather than abstract rules."³⁰ And so, doing philosophy is not just about providing an abstract theory that has nothing to do with emotions or our own personal lives. Instead, Nussbaum implies that we can also be philosophers by providing stories of our own personal experiences, or the experiences of fictional characters and circumstances, using these to methodically reflect on and analyze our beliefs and ideas about how to navigate the challenges of living a good life. And this is the way that Taylor Swift is a philosopher.

Of course, even if we think Swift is a philosopher, it doesn't mean that all her work counts as philosophy, or that she is a philosopher *all the time*. And we don't know whether she ever intended to be a philosopher—maybe it's a label that she doesn't even want. But being a philosopher is something that Taylor should be proud of, using her work to systematically reflect on the big questions in life. There are good and bad ways to do philosophy. After all, philosophers train for years to sharpen their thinking skills and analyze systems of thought and different forms of argumentation. Without this training, Taylor is an accidental philosopher. But just think of the philosophical wisdom that will leave us enchanted when, like she sings in "Bejeweled," her philosophical skills "polish up real nice."