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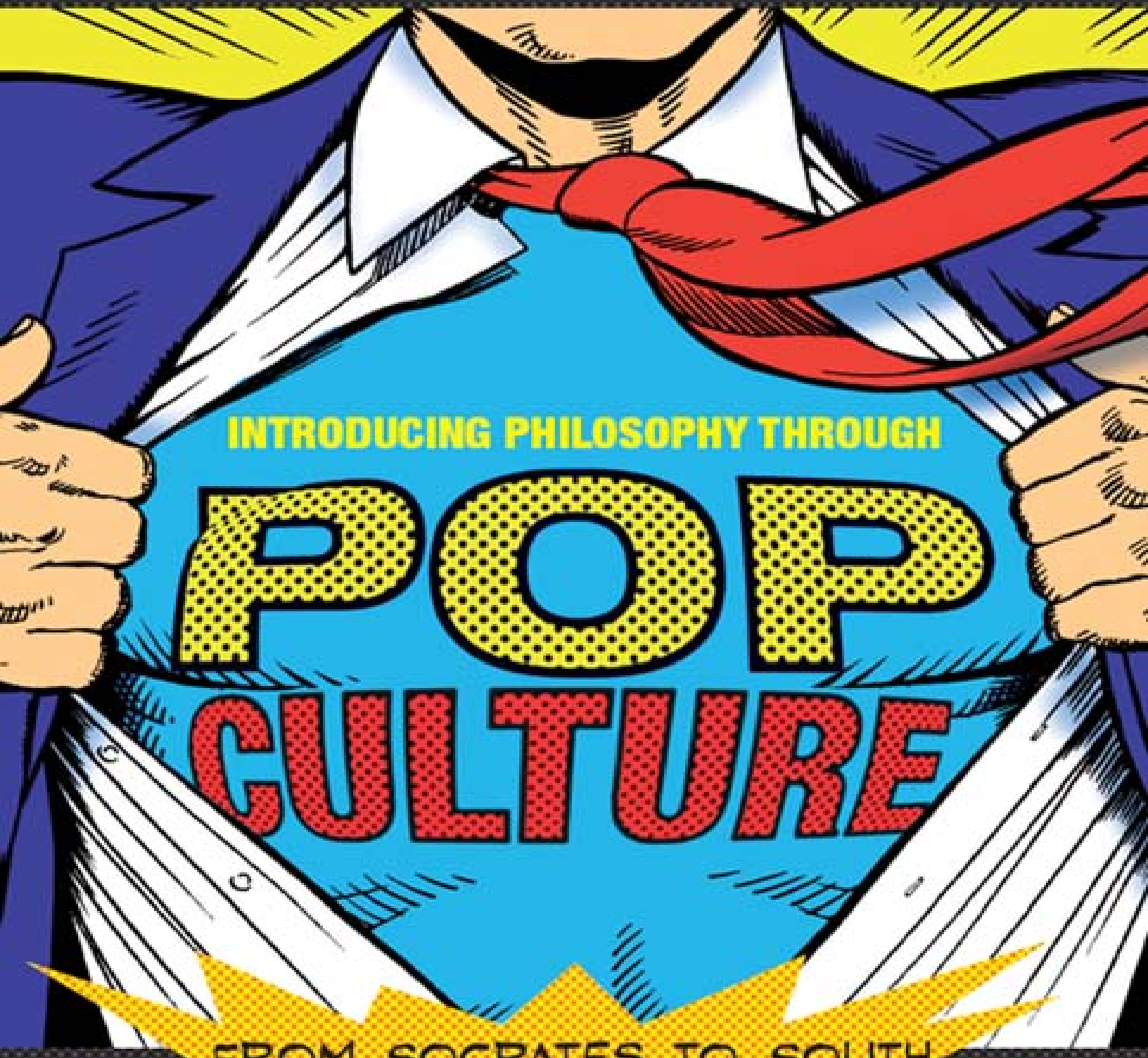

INTRODUCING PHILOSOPHY THROUGH

POP CULTURE

FROM SOCRATES TO SOUTH PARK, HUME TO HOUSE

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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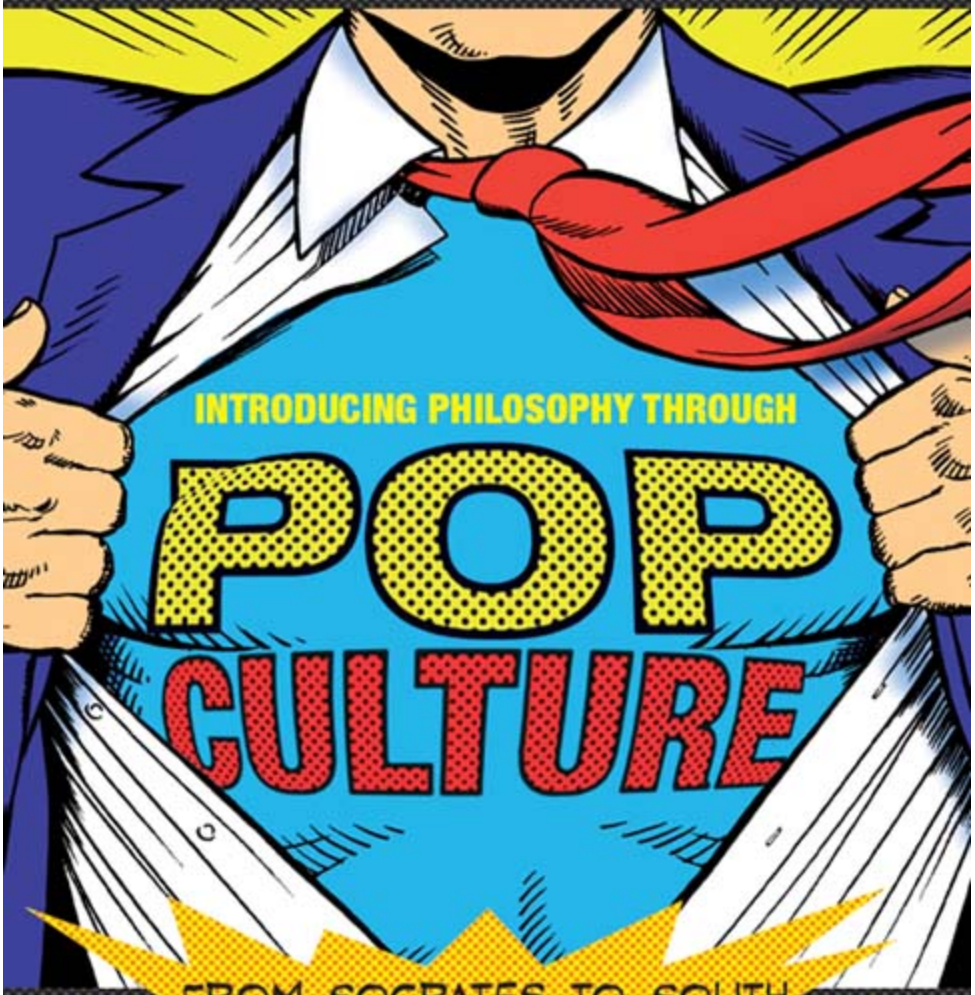

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Introducing Philosophy through Pop Culture

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From Socrates to *South Park*, Hume to *House*

Edited by William Irwin and
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Introduction

Philosophy has a public relations problem. Just the sound of the word “philosophy” scares a lot of people, conjuring images of long-dead Greeks and crusty old professors. But the stereotypes of philosophy are just that – stereotypes. They are mistaken exaggerations and overgeneralizations. Western Philosophy may have begun in Ancient Greece, but it is alive and well in contemporary America and around the globe. Some philosophy professors may be egg-headed, ivory tower intellectuals, but most are not. In fact, many philosophy professors like the same things you like: television, movies, music, and video games. We see connections between these elements of pop culture and philosophy. So this book, written by philosophy professors, takes you from pop culture to philosophy; we wade into the shallow water before swimming out deep. Each chapter focuses on a piece of pop culture, like *Harry Potter* or *The Office,* and teaches you about a particular issue in philosophy or the views of a particular philosopher. We think you’ll agree that, to paraphrase a classic Disney truism, a spoonful of pop culture helps the philosophy go down.

The idea of using examples to facilitate learning is not new to philosophy. Famously, Plato (429–347 BCE) used the story of the ring of Gyges, and Descartes (1596–1650) imagined a deceitful demon. However, most examples in philosophy are rather dry – finding people with bland names like Jones and Brown in difficult to describe circumstances, such as those in which we are potentially justified in believing that “Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.” Thankfully, Hollywood writers do a much better job of creating engaging, imaginative scenarios than philosophers do. So why not use their creations to add spice to philosophy? As you’ll discover in this book, *The Matrix* provides a vivid way

of picturing Descartes' concerns about deception and knowledge, and *South Park* hilariously dramatizes the problem of evil by asking why good things (like inheriting a million dollars) happen to bad people (like Cartman). Indeed, many other insightful philosophical illustrations from pop culture await your reading.

Now, of course, you may be concerned that you're in trouble because in addition to being clueless about philosophy you're also clueless about *The Matrix* and *South Park.* There's no need to worry. You don't have to be an expert on Batman or to have seen every episode of *House* to benefit from this book. Even a passing acquaintance with the pop culture icon discussed in any given chapter will be enough for you to learn the philosophy to which it is connected. You can get that easily enough on the Internet. In fact, you can visit the website for this book at www.pop-philosophy.org for all kinds of helpful up-to-date links.

In sum, this book is intended to make initial connections between pop culture and philosophy that will pique your interest in the latter and lead you to study and appreciate the subject more deeply. Maybe you'll even decide to tell your friends that philosophy has gotten a bad rap. Certainly, we believe you'll find that philosophy is relevant, fun, and exciting.

How to Use this Book in a Philosophy Course

This book is intended to serve primarily as a supplementary text in Introduction to Philosophy courses. Introductory courses are structured in a variety of different ways depending on the professor. Some courses are questions and issues based, some are historically based. Some courses use a standard textbook; others rely on primary

philosophical texts. Others mix it up and use a combination of approaches. This book is designed to go along with any of them. However, this book is not intended to cover all philosophical issues and figures in exhaustive detail. We leave that for the main text and the professor.

This book can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. Its chapters can be used to introduce a philosophical topic unfamiliar to the student. Assigning a summary of the chapter can ensure the student reads it and is better prepared for a lecture on the topic of the chapter. Each chapter could also be used for philosophical reflection; you might consider having your students write reflection or argument papers in response to them. If you are worried about whether your students are familiar with the relevant pop culture phenomena, there is a wiki site for each pop culture phenomenon discussed (e.g., heroeswiki.com) that can provide a quick and easy summary. Other suggestions for professors on how to use this book in courses are available at www.pop-philosophy.org.

Part I

What is Philosophy?

Introduction

The word “philosophy” is often confused with the words “opinion,” “theory” or “approach” – as in, “What is your philosophy of life?” or “Our philosophy is never to be undersold!” As a result, some students have mistaken ideas about what a philosophy class is. “Can you even give a wrong answer in a philosophy class? Isn’t it just whatever you think?” Well, yes you can, and no it’s not.

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek language and means “love of wisdom.” Philosophers seek truth and wisdom above all else. The questions for which true answers are most important, but most elusive, form the core of philosophy. What is the nature of reality? What is knowledge, and how can one attain it? Is there a God? What is the nature of good and evil? How can I live a good life? How should we govern ourselves? What is the meaning of life? So how do philosophers seek answers these questions? Are there really answers? Or is whatever anyone thinks just “true for them” because they have a “right to their opinion"? What role does philosophy play in society? And, what attitude does philosophy require?

In his chapter, William Young argues that philosophy and the TV show *South Park* share some common aims. Like the philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), *South Park* is charged with corrupting the youth, inappropriately challenging moral norms, and being a social nuisance. But, the accusations are

unfounded for both Socrates and *South Park.* The accusers are actually the corruptors; for example, parents corrupt the youth when they leave their kids to be raised by television without educating them about what they are seeing. Thankfully *South Park,* like Socrates, teaches us to draw our own conclusions – not merely accept the consensus of the crowd – and to reach those conclusions by considering the perspectives of others. Clearly, Young argues, *South Park* is not mindless and harmful; the show, like philosophy, is a gadfly, "an annoying pest that goes around 'stinging people' with … challenging questions and critical reflections so as to keep them intellectually awake and on their toes."

Philosophers' appetite for truth is insatiable, but they do not always agree. To solve their disputes they use logic. In his chapter, Robert Arp takes examples from *South Park* to teach some of the basics of logic including the structure of arguments, the differences between good and bad arguments, and the distinction between inductive and deductive arguments. The lesson concludes with common logical fallacies, illustrated by *South Park* for comedic effect. In one classic episode, for example, the cartoon version of Johnnie Cochran commits the red-herring fallacy by suggesting that Chef must not have written the Alanis Morissette song "Stinky Britches" because Chewbacca spent most of his time on Endor: "If Chewbacca lives on Endor, you must acquit."

South Park is not the only show that plays philosopher. Late night political talk shows, like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report,* are gadflies as well. In his chapter, David Kyle Johnson uses Stephen Colbert to teach us about the philosophical attitude. Relativism (what Colbert calls "wikiality") and intuitionism (what Colbert calls "truthiness") are contrary to the endeavor of philosophy. More importantly, Johnson enlists Colbert to dispel a myth that holds back almost every philosophy course – the myth that

everyone has a right to their opinion. Attempts to end philosophical discussion with appeals to “a right to my opinion” only reveal a disregard for truth and a desire to protect entrenched beliefs. Real philosophers must be willing to give up disproven beliefs and embrace the truth.

Chapter 1

Flatulence and Philosophy

A Lot of Hot Air, or the Corruption of Youth?

William W. Young III

Summary

Though Trey Parker and Matt Stone haven't been killed for it yet (they did receive death threats after their 200th episode) the creators of *South Park* have faced accusations much like those that led to Socrates' execution: the corruption of youth and the teaching of vulgar, irreligious behavior. A closer examination, however, reveals that *South Park* is very much within the Platonic tradition, as Kyle and Stan engage in questioning and dialogue in order to "learn something today." Moreover, the mob mentality of the parents, along with the malicious yet mimetic evil of Cartman, demonstrates how evil emerges from thoughtlessness: a failure to ask if one can live with oneself, and a failure to put oneself in the place of others. Through its different characters, and even in its apparently mindless vulgarity, *South Park* shows the need for engaging in dialogue, and thinking from others' perspectives, in order to pursue wisdom, examine life, and make it worth living.

The "Danger" of *South Park*

In the episode "Death," Kyle's mother leads a boycott of the boys' favorite cartoon show – *Terrance and Philip* – because of its continuous farting, name-calling, and general "potty humor." While the parents are up in arms over this "moral"

issue, the boys wrestle with the problem of euthanasia for Stan's grandfather, something none of the parents will discuss with them. "Death" brings together many of the central issues that have made *South Park* successful and controversial: vulgarity, the misplaced moral concerns of American culture, the discussion of controversial moral topics, and the criticism that *South Park* itself is a "disgusting" show. Since "Death" the criticism of the show has only grown – getting even bigger than Cartman's fat ass – drawing fire for its obscene language, criticisms of religion, and emphasis upon freedom of speech.

Like the parents protesting *The Terrance and Philip Show,* critics of *South Park* make claims that are strikingly similar to those that have been leveled against Western philosophy since its beginnings. It mocks religious **beliefs,** leads younger folks to question accepted authority and values, and corrupts our children and culture. The "it" in the previous sentence refers to *South Park,* but in fact, the same criticisms formed the basis for Socrates' (470–399 BCE) trial and execution in Athens, Greece in 399 BCE.[1] So in this chapter we'll explore the heretical possibility that people perceive *South Park* as dangerous precisely because it is a form of philosophy. The "danger" that *South Park* poses has to do with its depiction of dialogue and free thinking. In the end we will have learned something: like Socrates, *South Park* harms no one. Philosophy and *South Park* actually instruct people and provide them with the intellectual tools they need to become wise, free, and good.

Oh My God! They Killed Socrates! You Bastards!

In Plato's (427–327 BCE) *Apology,* Socrates defends himself against two charges: (1) impiety (false teachings about the

gods, possibly that they don't exist) and (2) corrupting the youth of Athens. In reality, Socrates probably had as much chance of winning his case as Chef did against Johnny Cochran's "Chewbacca" defense! What is most important about Socrates' defense, however, is not so much what he says as *how* he says it. He defends himself by questioning his accuser, Meletus, leading him through a process of **reasoning.** For example, Socrates refutes the charge of corrupting the youth as follows:

SOCRATES:	You say you have discovered the one who corrupts them, namely me, and you bring me here and accuse me to the jury … All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?
MELETUS:	That is most definitely what I mean.
SOCRATES:	You condemn me to a great misfortune. Tell me: does this also apply to horses do you think? That all men improve them and one individual corrupts them? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals? … It would be a happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted our youth, while the others improved them. You have made it sufficiently obvious, Meletus, that you have never had any concern for our youth; you show your indifference clearly; that you have given no thought to the subjects about which you bring me to trial. *(Apology,* p. 30)

Through the analogy with horse training, Socrates shows how illogical the accusations against him really are. Just as a majority of people would injure horses by training them, and only a few good trainers improve them, so too it is likely that a few teachers improve the virtue of the youth, while many others corrupt them. Socrates argues, further, that he is in fact the one who is teaching Athens' youth what virtue involves, while many others – including the idiots sitting before him – corrupt them. (As you can imagine, this did not go over well with the jury.)

While showing that the accusations are groundless, this "apology" – a word that also can mean *defense* – demonstrates why Socrates got a death sentence of hemlock. Socrates is famous for saying "I know that I don't know" and, actually, this is a wise insight. For Socrates, philosophy was the love and pursuit of wisdom, and this

required questioning others to find out what they do or don't know. Unfortunately, people often believe they are wiser than they are. By questioning them, Socrates would show them that they don't know what they believe they know: "I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise" *(Apology,* pp. 28–9). What makes Socrates wise is his recognition of his own ignorance, through continuous questioning of himself and others. Many powerful people in Athens saw him as dangerous because his questioning and debate would undermine their bases for power.

In the town of South Park, people in positions of power believe they are teaching the children wisdom and virtue. However, as in Athens, the many people of South Park seem to make the children worse, not better. For example, Mr. Garrison "teaches" the children life lessons from re-runs of *Barnaby Jones,* Mrs. Broflovski always goes to crazy extremes with her "moral" outrage, Uncle Jim and Ned teach the boys to kill harmless bunnies and squirrels in "self-defense," and the mayor panders shamelessly to voters. None of the townsfolk really *talk* to the children, except Chef (God rest his soul), who taught the art of making sweet, sweet love to a woman. Blindly following the crowd, from protesting *The Terrance and Philip Show* to boy-cotting Harbucks, to – yes – burying their heads in the sand to avoid watching *Family Guy,* the parents of South Park corrupt the children far more than a television show ever could. Like the Athenians, the adults don't know as much as they believe they know. Ultimately, if television does corrupt them, it does so because they are left to it by their parents, with no one to educate them about what they are seeing. Of course, there are also cases where parents and people in powerful positions *do* try to discuss issues and **ideas** with the