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Popular Culture and Philosophy: Rules of Engagement

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Abstract

The exploration of popular culture topics by academic philosophers for non-academic audiences has given rise to a distinctive genre of philosophical writing. Edited volumes with titles such as Black Sabbath and Philosophy or Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy contain chapters by multiple philosophical authors that attempt to bring philosophy to popular audiences. Two dominant models have emerged in the genre. On the pedagogical model, authors use popular culture examples to teach the reader philosophy. The end is to promote philosophical literacy, defined as acquaintance with the key problems, ideas, and figures in the history of philosophy. In contrast, on the applied philosophy model, authors use philosophy to open up new dimensions of the popular culture topic for fans. The end is to illustrate the value of philosophy in understanding the popular culture topic, and ultimately, to demonstrate the value of philosophy in general. Taking stock of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these two models provides an opportunity to reflect more broadly on whether, why, and how philosophers should engage the public.

Introduction

Anything can be looked at philosophically. The question is what it means to do so. And this is a question that arises often in the genre known as popular culture and philosophy (PCP for short). In recent years there have been over a hundred books published in the PCP genre with titles such as: The Simpsons and Philosophy, Football and Philosophy, The Matrix and Philosophy, Metallica and Philosophy, Breaking Bad and Philosophy, and Dr. Seuss and Philosophy, to name a few. But why do such books come into being? What is their purpose? And why, as print is dying, are multiple presses bringing them out?

Certainly the PCP explosion in part reflects changes in the business climate for academic publishing. Open Court and Blackwell, whose series dominate this market, are primarily
academic publishers, but the book series that they publish in the PCP genre are trade paperbacks. The two earliest books in Open Court’s series were *Seinfeld and Philosophy* (Irwin, 1999) and *The Simpsons and Philosophy* (Irwin, Conard, and Skoble, 2001). For Open Court, the philosophy imprint of children’s publishing giant Carus Publishing, the success of these two books (*The Simpsons and Philosophy* had sold 210,000 copies as of 2004 [Hunt, 2004]), was the modern-day incarnation of founder Paul Carus’s legacy, dating to the late 19th century, of bringing high quality philosophical discussion to the masses.¹

Yet surely, the very existence of the PCP genre must also reflect a hunger for philosophy on the part of some segment of the public. While not all titles have been equally commercially successful, some have been translated into other languages (witness *Die Philosophie bei Johnny Cash*, *Los Simpson y la Filosofía*, and *Metallica: Une interprétation philosophique*), and there has presumably been sufficient demand that offerings continue to issue forth at a lively clip. Other academic publishers such as Rowman and Littlefield (*Dr. Seuss and Philosophy*) and University Press of Kentucky (*Football and Philosophy*) have also entered the market.

**Rules of engagement**

Both the Open Court and Blackwell series offer a set of editorial guidelines to their editors and authors.² These urge authors and editors to make frequent reference to the popular culture topic, to avoid trashing the popular culture topic, to desist from issuing apologias for the very enterprise of bringing, say, *SpongeBob Squarepants* into philosophical focus, to favor colloquial over academic language, and to include the vital dates of any philosophers that are mentioned. The Open Court guidelines amount to a pamphlet, the Blackwell guidelines more of a succinct style sheet. The Blackwell guidelines instruct contributors to “teach without being teachy” and in an online letter addressed to readers, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series editor William Irwin writes: “With each volume in this series we seek to teach philosophy using the themes, characters, and ideas from your favorite TV shows, comic books, movies, music, games, and more” (Irwin, 2009-2013).

In contrast, the Open Court guidelines question whether instruction really should be the purpose and aim of their series:

> Your chapter should focus on the topic, and should bring in philosophical ideas naturally, as a way of illuminating the topic. We don’t want your readers to get the idea that you’re not really that into the topic and merely want to use it as a pretext for teaching them some philosophy.
As an exercise, imagine that your neighbor or relative—someone definitely not a philosopher—is an avid fan of the topic and is thrilled to hear that you too are a fan. Talk to this non-philosopher acquaintance, not to your fellow philosophers, and explain how some specific philosophical insights help you to appreciate the topic (Steele, 2012).

From these sets of guidelines, two models for the PCP genre can be distilled. One, the *pedagogical model*, uses the popular culture topic (e.g., Iron Maiden, golf, the novels of Stieg Larsson, *Jeopardy*, the films of Woody Allen) as a vehicle for promoting philosophical literacy. The other, the *applied philosophy model*, treats insight into the popular culture topic as the end, and philosophy as a means (albeit a privileged means) to that end.

Of course, all PCP writing is pedagogical in one sense or another. One might well object that these two models are not all that different. After all, isn’t the Open Court warning (“We don’t want your readers to get the idea that you’re not really that into the topic and merely want to use it as a pretext for teaching them some philosophy”) just a longwinded way of saying “teach without being teachy”? But the difference between the two models is not that one teaches and the other does not. Rather, as will be seen below, it lies in their differing presuppositions about what should be taught and how, differing ethoi of engaging the general reader, and differing views on how philosophy can serve a useful social and political role.

To be clear, although these models have been extracted from these two sets of guidelines, I do not mean to imply that all contributions to the Blackwell series follow the pedagogical model, and that all contributions to the Open Court series follow the applied philosophy model. The same authors freely move between different publishers’ series, and often make no attempt to have their writing conform to the guidelines of that particular publisher. Moreover, the guidelines themselves have evolved over time as editors and the publishers have gained experience with the genre. Finally, I by no means wish to suggest that all PCP writing falls under one or the other of these two models. Better to think of them as idealizations of two different ways to bring philosophy and popular culture into fruitful contact.

In this paper, I examine both of these models, and give moral and pragmatic reasons to favor of the applied philosophy model. I further argue that the social goals identified by Irwin and that motivate the guidelines for the pedagogical model are better achieved, in principle, by adhering to the applied philosophy model. Thinking about alternative models
for the PCP genre provides an opportunity to reflect more broadly on whether, why, and how philosophers should engage the public.

The pedagogical model

In “The Pop Culture Manifesto,” William Irwin writes of the opportunity that the ubiquity and, well, popularity of popular culture afford the philosopher to bring the public to philosophy:

So how can we get people further interested in philosophy? The answer, to paraphrase a popular British philosopher, is we need “a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.” We need to start with popular culture and use it to bring people to philosophy (Irwin, 2007).

On this model, the primary aim of works in the PCP genre is to lure the public into philosophy by meeting them where they live: in front of the proverbial tube. Multiple lines of evidence support the claim that all of the PCP series share the aim of luring the uninitiated into philosophy. Irwin makes the case that this is an important social project:

Philosophy needs to replace pseudophilosophy (crystals, astrology, Tarot Cards) as science must replace pseudo-science (often surrounding things such as Big Foot, Loch Ness, UFOs, and other paranormal phenomena). Pseudo-philosophy, like pseudo-science, is attractively packaged and readily available. So philosophy needs similar packaging and availability if it is to compete (Irwin, 2007).

Irwin models philosophical literacy on scientific literacy. Just as everyone, even and especially non-scientists, should be scientifically literate, so should they be philosophically literate. For Irwin, this means “having a sense of the history and questions of philosophy.” He adds:

Citizens of a democracy would be better citizens for having a knowledge of philosophy, as it teaches them to think critically and encourages them to dissent responsibly (Irwin, 2007).

What does popular culture have to offer in this enterprise? A treasure-trove of examples, points out Irwin. Just as Martha Nussbaum has made the case for the value of literature in theorizing about ethics (Nussbaum, 1985), Irwin sees popular culture as a ready source of examples, less contrived than those that philosophers typically dream up, and either widely
known or at least accessible (Irwin, 2007). Consider the way that in one fell swoop Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, Nagel’s Brain in a Vat, and Nozick’s Experience Machine, three of the most widely known thought experiments in philosophy, have been displaced by The Matrix (Irwin, 2002a, b; Grau, 2005).⁴ “How do I know I am not in Plato’s Cave?” and “How do I know I am not a brain in a vat?” have become “How do I know I am not in the Matrix?” “Why prefer real experiences to subjectively indistinguishable ones provided by the Experience Machine?” has become “Why not take the blue pill?”⁵

The scenario presented in The Matrix is certainly well suited for illustrating previously identified philosophical problems that stem from various positions on the relationship between experience and reality. The ascent of virtual reality in contemporary culture also allows The Matrix to serve as a less strained and more plausible thought experiment than its philosophical predecessors. As Irwin has illustrated, The Matrix can also be seen as a cinematic retelling of the story of Socrates, with Neo playing the lead role (Irwin, 2002b). Still, one wonders whether an appreciation for these parts of the philosophical tradition have much to do with the promotion of critical thinking and responsible dissent, held up as societal ends that might be served by PCP writing.

The applied philosophy model

As mentioned earlier, the distinctive feature of the applied philosophy model is that philosophy serves to illuminate the popular culture topic. This need not presuppose that there is some aspect of the popular topic that raises a philosophical question. All that is required is that the popular culture item presents a problem—philosophical or not—that can yield to philosophical analysis. Sometimes identifying just the right philosophical angle can be difficult, but this is true of philosophy in general. Not every problem that the world presents to us can be solved using the tools of philosophy, so we either search for a problem that can be solved using the tools we have, we alter the problem at hand to one that we can solve, or we search for different tools.

Perhaps the most successful exemplar of the applied philosophy model may be found in Jason Holt’s “The Costanza Maneuver” in Seinfeld and Philosophy (1999). In an episode of Seinfeld, Jerry’s friend George Costanza experiences a moment of clarity in which he sees that every instinct he has, in every aspect of life, has been wrong. Spurred on by Jerry, George elects to “do the opposite” in each situation, leading to a surprising run of successes in his personal and professional life. Holt’s chapter brilliantly subjects this action-guiding principle, which he dubs the “Costanza maneuver” to a close analysis. The question at the heart of the inquiry is whether the Costanza maneuver is rational. Properly interpreted as
referring to George’s basic desires and instincts, it is found to be coherent. Holt goes on to examine different types of practical reason—relations between action-guiding principles and their desired ends—and argues that a pair of conditions, reliability and feasibility, are jointly necessary for the Costanza maneuver to come out rational. He shows how three distinct psychological flaws—lack of restraint, akrasia (weakness of will), and absence of impulse in key situations—are so deeply rooted in George’s character as to render the Costanza maneuver unfeasible. Finally, he points out that even were George able to overcome these psychological barriers to the principle’s feasibility, “do the opposite” itself, as an action-guiding principle, is woefully indeterminate. It is simply unclear what the opposite of ordering tuna on toast is.

Holt’s essay possesses three virtues that I think are characteristic of the best PCP writing under the applied philosophy model. First, he identifies a question that is actually raised by the Seinfeld episode: is it rational for George to “do the opposite”? Second, he draws both upon the resources of the show itself and the tools of philosophy to answer the question. Finally, he saves his philosophical trump card—the indeterminacy of “do the opposite”—for the end of the chapter, showing that his conclusion itself is actually overdetermined by considerations drawn both from the focal item of popular culture (in this case, George’s many character flaws) and the relevant philosophical considerations. This is PCP—popular culture and philosophy—at its finest.

Holt’s chapter is also noteworthy for what it does not do. It does not exhibit any of the several vices that commonly afflict chapters in the PCP books. First, it does not make unnecessary references to philosophers or draw facile connections to philosophical ideas that are not needed to solve the problem. Second, it does not engage in “forced association.” Forced association consists in finding unhelpful similarities and strained connections between the pop culture topic and philosophy (e.g., “baseball fans love to argue, just as philosophers love to argue”). Third, it does not bring up other characters, lines, and situations from the show merely to sustain the fan’s interest, but enlists them seamlessly along with the philosophical analysis, such that it is the analysis itself and its various sub-arguments that command the fan’s attention. Finally, Holt does not condescend by adopting the tone of a philosophical expert but engages the reader as an equal. Simple devices such as the frequent use of “we” help to establish an egalitarian ethos.

In other words, Holt’s piece uses the tools and ideas of philosophy to illuminate an element of Seinfeld for its fans and in so doing demonstrates the relevance and payoff of those tools and methods. This is a key difference between the applied philosophy and pedagogical models. Whereas the pedagogical model assumes philosophy is important and uses popular
cultural to make it more palatable to the general public, applied philosophy pieces assume no such thing. The value of philosophy is something to be demonstrated in the doing.

**PCP as a Hybrid Genre**

The fulcrum in the phrase “Popular Culture and Philosophy” is the word “and.” How this logical connector is understood by the PCP writer and editor determines whether the chapter gets off the ground. PCP at its best is a hybrid genre, the fan-philosopher lovechild that struggles for legitimacy. Nearly all of the authors of PCP chapters are academic philosophers, yet the readership, and by this I mean the target readership, is almost exclusively non-academic. The series are aimed primarily at the general reader, the fan of the popular culture topic.

This tension between two sets of norms—those governing the academic article and the trade paperback respectively—affects the PCP genre in two distinct, diametrically opposed ways. On one hand, it is liberating for a philosopher to be able to write for a broad, non-academic audience about philosophy, especially in connection with a favorite film, band, TV show, or sport. Not only is the philosophical terrain wide open (one can range a bit outside of one’s area of specialization), but there is the thrill of connecting with “the public,” of making a difference, of having one’s work actually read by a large audience (of fellow fans), as opposed to languishing unread in the pages of a reputable peer-reviewed journal. On the other hand, many fine philosophers find themselves unable or unwilling to write within the constraints of editorial guidelines that are geared toward a readership consisting of the general public. This may say as much about the opacity of much of academic philosophical writing as it does about the presumed level of literacy and intellectual competency of the general public.6

**Trusting the reader**

The literary translator Joanna Trzeciak (2012) has spoken of trusting the reader in translation. In the translation of poetry, for example, where polysemy and multivalence are the rule, the translator often faces the choice of whether to close down interpretive possibilities for the sake of clarity (not to mention the difficulty of carrying those possibilities over from the source language) or whether to open up new interpretive possibilities in the target language (assuming such can be found). There is a strong temptation to settle on a single interpretation and render it clearly in translation. This assures that the translation will be regarded as “successful,” usually by those who do not know the source language. In contrast, to open up new possibilities requires—and places—
trust in the reader. This is the opposite of spoon-feeding the reader a single interpretation, presumably the translator’s own. It is pointless to open up multiple interpretive possibilities for someone who is altogether illiterate, or is unaware of the genre of poetry and any of the conventions for reading it. Rather, what is needed is a justified trust, one that is based on the actual or reasonably presupposed competencies of the reader, some of which can be provided by the translator in paratext (prefatory materials, notes, and annotations).

What goes for poetry goes for philosophy. In the PCP genre, the philosophical author too faces an issue of trust in the reader. It doesn’t take exactly the same form as in poetry, but it is analogous. Most philosophers, when writing for other philosophers, greatly value linguistic precision, and will make and adhere to fine distinctions. Can the PCP reader be trusted to get the point of such distinctions and to read carefully enough that it is worth the author’s while to make the distinction at all? Or should the author instead collapse such distinctions? To what extent is trust in the reader’s philosophical competencies justified?

To illustrate the problem, consider Timmerman’s chapter on speciesism in *Planet of the Apes and Philosophy* (2013). In one section, discussing the possession of interests by Zira and Cornelius, two chimp scientists who travel through time to 1970s Los Angeles, Timmerman introduces the distinction between moral considerability and moral status. To be morally considerable means to qualify for having one’s interests taken into account, whereas to have moral status is to be capable of being wronged. But one can reasonably question whether moral status need be introduced at all, especially since Timmerman’s argument at that point relies chiefly on the principle of equal consideration of interests, which, at least on Peter Singer’s formulation in *Animal Liberation*, explicitly disregards the moral status of those whose interests are being considered, focusing solely on the interests themselves (Singer, 1975). But if one takes into account the target readership, it makes good sense to retain this distinction, not necessarily for the sake of the philosophical argument (need one introduce moral status only to say that it is irrelevant to the application of the principle of equal consideration of interests?), but because the examples Timmerman draws upon from *Planet of the Apes* are so aptly chosen and appealing to fans that it would have been a shame to discard them. That said, in practice, because PCP is a hybrid genre in which academics are called upon to write non-academic prose, ultimately the success of these chapters depends as much upon the skill of the writers and editors as it does on the argument being made and the model being followed.
The ends and means of the popular culture and philosophy genre

Irwin (2007) has correctly identified an important set of social ends that the PCP genre can and should serve. A democracy should cultivate and value in its citizens the ability to “think critically” and “dissent responsibly.” Knowledge of philosophy can certainly serve as a means to this end, and given its wide reach, the PCP genre can play an important role. The question is what we mean when we speak of “knowledge of philosophy.” One possibility for PCP writing is to aim for increasing the philosophical literacy of the public, by which Irwin (2007) seems to mean their familiarity with the history of philosophy and its main questions. This form of philosophic literacy is not only roughly analogous with scientific literacy, as Irwin discusses, but sits squarely in the tradition of cultural literacy a la E.D. Hirsch, whose 1988 *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* launched a culture war. One can debate the merits of familiarity with the Western canon, whether cultural literacy should be replaced by multicultural literacy, or even whether it makes sense for there to be any one body of knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, with which everyone ought to be acquainted (ironically enough, popular culture itself—especially television series, it seems to me—may quietly be supplying us with a new and evolving canon), but an equally important question is whether philosophical literacy is the best model of philosophical knowledge for serving the social ends of better critical thinking and more responsible dissent. It is certainly possible to distinguish familiarity with the history and main questions of philosophy, which can easily devolve into namedropping and “ismism,” from the ability to engage in philosophical analysis. If we take the pedagogical model to be primarily concerned with using popular culture to improve philosophical literacy, it can at least be questioned whether this is the best means to promote critical thinking and responsible dissent among citizens.

In contrast, the applied philosophy model seems well suited to promote a different form of philosophical knowledge, one we might call philosophical competence. In the applied philosophy model, the PCP writer embarks on the solution of a problem, or the analysis of an issue, using the tools and ideas of philosophy. This model places the reader in the position not of a pupil, but of a fellow traveler, or perhaps an apprentice, participating in philosophical analysis and experiencing the power of philosophy to solve problems, debunk dubious claims, and achieve clarity. By demonstrating the capability of philosophy to illuminate items of popular culture, the applied philosophy model provides an exemplar that may perhaps be extended by the reader to other problem situations. If this seems a stretch, at least the applied philosophy model can give the PCP reader a clear image of how philosophy is done, and contribute to an appreciation for critical thinking and responsible dissent.
Conclusion

The PCP genre is already engaging various publics. Here I have discussed two among many possible models, each with its own set of rules of engagement. I have argued that while both the pedagogical model and applied philosophy model serve to bring philosophy to the general public, the applied philosophy model is better suited to the social and political aims of promoting critical thinking and responsible dissent. But there are other reasons to prefer the applied philosophy model.

The first set of reasons is based on the differing images of philosophy that ground the two models. Irwin (2007), who champions what I call the pedagogical model presupposes that philosophy is important but unpleasant (or perhaps foul-tasting), and thus enlists the aid of popular culture to make philosophy (especially its key figures and ideas) more palatable to the public. The applied philosophy model, in contrast, presupposes not that philosophy is unpalatable, but that it is useful and illuminating, and that its usefulness can be demonstrated by its ability to provide insight into items of popular culture. Philosophy does not need sugarcoating because its value can be demonstrated in use. Perhaps, it might be objected, the applied philosophy model thereby demeans philosophy by relegating it to a subservient role, a handmaiden to the appreciation of popular culture. In response it might be stated that while philosophy often looks inward to its own problems, the fact that there are problems outside of philosophy that yield to philosophical analysis does not demean the discipline, but exalts it. It might also be objected that to reduce philosophy to a set of problem-solving tools is to fail to appreciate it sufficiently deeply. In reply one might argue that even in the purest of pure philosophy, say Quine’s (1951) questioning of the analytic-synthetic distinction, the applied nature of much of philosophy is obscured by the fact that what it is often being applied to is philosophy itself. In this broad sense of “applied,” more of philosophy is applied than is commonly recognized.

The second set of reasons for preferring the applied philosophy model is based on the distinction between literacy and competence and what this implies about the relationship between the author and the reader. Assuming that philosophical literacy (modeled on cultural and scientific literacy) is the goal of the pedagogical model, the author is placed in the position of teaching (“without being teachy”) something about philosophers and some of their ideas. Put this way, one almost necessarily proceeds from the assumption that the reader knows very little about philosophy, and that, hopefully with some subtlety and creativity, the philosophical expert can pass their knowledge along to the reader. One can easily imagine that if this is inexpertly done, pedantry results, and that even if done in a stealthful way, there is something inegalitarian and elitist about the whole enterprise. In
contrast, the applied philosophy model assumes that in important ways philosophic thought is just a manifestation of the power of reason (and passion and intuition) possessed to some extent by all readers, and that the reader can be a fellow traveler or would-be interlocutor in the philosophical investigation of the problem. This model places the author and reader more on a par as fellow philosophers. Admittedly, the difference here may in part be a matter of literary and expository style. It is possible to promote philosophical literacy in an egalitarian way, and to be elitist in demonstrating one’s own philosophical competence. Yet if we control for differences in writing skill and effectiveness, the applied philosophy model assumes a more level playing field between author and reader than does the pedagogical model. If we accept that one important social role for the PCP genre is to support the democratic ideals of critical thinking and responsible dissent, it seems to me that a model that assumes a level playing field is more democratic, and hence, better suited to the task.

Although I favor the applied philosophy model for the reasons given earlier, in practice, some degree of pluralism is called for. This is in part due to the particularities of the films, music, sports, games, books, and television shows that serve as the foci of these volumes. Creativity, insight, and flexibility are necessary to find philosophical approaches that are not facile. But it is also because popular culture and philosophy is a young, evolving hybrid genre whose most successful exemplars reflect the particular writing skills and overall orientations to philosophy and to popular culture embodied by the genre’s practitioners.

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References


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Notes

1 Carus’s magazine, *The Open Court*, tackled a range of issues in philosophy, religion, science and their interrelations throughout its 49-year tenure (1887-1936).

2 At the time this was written, Open Court had published 80 titles in their Popular Culture and Philosophy series, Blackwell had published 34 titles in their Philosophy and Pop Culture series, University Press of Kentucky had published 31 titles in its Philosophy of Popular Culture series, and Rowman and Littlefield had published two books in the genre. Of these publishers, only Open Court and Blackwell have produced explicit guidelines for authors and editors, tailored to the PCP genre.

3 Books in these series are nearly always prefaced by words of welcome to reassure those new to philosophy that the pages that follow are written by fellow fans who happen to be philosophers. Inclusive language also abounds in the promotional literature and series descriptions on publisher websites.

4 Among aestheticists, Noël Carroll has been a strong advocate for the view that fictions can serve as thought experiments, thus providing philosophical instruction, without this coming into conflict with their status as aesthetic objects (Carroll 2002). Wartenberg (2006) has pushed this even further in arguing that beyond serving as mere fodder for philosophy, popular films can actually *be* philosophy.

5 In *The Matrix*, Morpheus offers Neo a choice between the blue pill, which will allow him to remain in the illusory world of the matrix, and a red pill, which will awaken him to reality.

6 Crispin Sartwell (2013) has lovingly eulogized the prose style of philosopher Arthur Danto as a striking counterexample to the overly technical stylistic norms that govern much of analytic philosophy in Danto’s time and our own.