AESTHETICS in the AGE of NEW MEDIA

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The Philosophy of Popular Culture and the Unpopularity of Philosophy:

A Medieval Love Story with Three Acts and an Unhappy Ending

Stuart Dalton

Abstract

I argue that a current effort to popularize philosophy by linking it to popular culture repeats some of the same misunderstandings and mistakes that occurred in the Middle Ages when philosophy linked itself to institutional religion.

In both cases philosophy loses its identity and becomes ridiculous in the pursuit of an impossible popularity.
Act 1

Philosophy began when two ideals came together to form an unstable partnership. The first ideal is the desire to know the world on its most basic level, to understand the ultimate nature of reality, knowledge and values. The other ideal is a faith in the power of independent thinking — the confidence that humans can discover the ultimate nature of things through their own thought, without deferring to any other authorities, traditions or institutions. When pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander or Heraclitus first dared to theorize about the ultimate nature of the world, and did so without appealing to any authority other than their own thinking, a fundamentally new mode of inquiry entered human history.

Like all partnerships, the partnership between these two ideals was not without tension. Thinking about the ultimate nature of things will give you something to say — perhaps even something marketable to say — about everything. Since philosophy chooses to be a subterranean activity, a cellar dweller, devoting all its time to examining the foundations of the values and beliefs that structure the world above, it has a natural, fundamental connection to every human activity and every aspect of human culture. It has the ability to comment about everything, and so
it can if it chooses immediately go into the business of cultural commentary. So, for example, when Heraclitus theorized that ‘one cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, but it scatters and again gathers; it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs’¹, he could have then immediately started a book series applying his radical theories about the impermanence of the world to every manifestation of popular culture that he could find in the 6th century BCE. And this could have been a very good book series, offering genuine insights into the pop culture of the day, because Heraclitus’ philosophy did indeed offer the possibility of a radical reinterpretation of every aspect of the world.

However Heraclitus chose not to spend any time criticizing popular culture because he placed an even greater value on philosophy’s second guiding principle: the ideal of thinking for oneself. Heraclitus came to be known as ‘Heraclitus the Obscure’ because he had no interest in popularizing his philosophy or making its application clear to anyone. He completed only one book, ‘having purposely written it rather obscurely so that only those of rank and influence should have access to it, and it should not be easily despised by the populace’². Heraclitus had no inter-

est in using his philosophy to understand popular culture because he was in too much of a hurry to understand himself. He knew that the point of independent thinking is to arrive at an independent understanding that will liberate one from the mistakes of the masses. ‘I went in search of myself’, he writes, and so should everyone else: ‘It belongs to all men to know themselves and to think well’; but it won’t be easy because (as he noted) ‘nature loves to hide’ and ‘the Lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign’.

The tension that Heraclitus sought to mediate in his own unique way, by writing with deliberate obscurity, originates in the fact that philosophy’s two guiding principles don’t really need each other: one can think about the ultimate nature of things without making any effort to think independently; and one can think independently without making any effort to think about the ultimate nature of things. Only something like love brings these two principles together, and as in all love affairs the partnership that results is fragile and there is always the possibility of betrayal. At its best the tension inherent in this rela-

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4 *Ibidem.*
5 *Ivi*, p. 33.
6 *Ivi*, p. 43.
tionship is a productive tension that catalyzes a seri-
ous conversation between the individual thinker and
the world in which she finds herself. This produces
the phenomenon well known to anyone who reads
carefully any truly great text from the history of
philosophy: it becomes impossible to neatly separate
the three main areas of philosophy – metaphysics,
epistemology, and axiology. They transgress their
traditional boundaries, intersecting and melding in
a way that unifies the otherwise disparate and seem-
ingly mutually exclusive projects of understanding
oneself and understanding the world.

But there are also moments in the history of
philosophy when the tension between thinking for
yourself and thinking about the world becomes a
dysfunctional tension that sets these two principles
at odds with each other and leads to a distorted mode
of inquiry that is far removed from the lofty idealism
that characterized philosophy when it first made its
appearance with the presocratics.

Act 2

One such moment is the very long interval
(roughly 1100 years) that we call ‘medieval
philosophy’. In the medieval period the ideal of
independent thinking vanishes almost completely.
Philosophy continues to investigate the ultimate
nature of reality, knowledge and values, but it does so
now under the watchful eye of religion. Theological necessity and religious authority circumscribe the limits of what can be thought and philosophy becomes a contract employee of theology, completely surrendering its own independence.

However without question philosophy is more popular in the Middle Ages than at any other time in its history. Christianity was the cultural powerhouse of this time, and by hitching its wagon to this star philosophy gained fame and influence far beyond the meager impact of any individual philosopher, such as Socrates, who was such a failure in the popular culture of his own time that his fellow Athenians agreed that he did not deserve to live. No longer the outpost of the marginal and the obscure – strange people who even Plato acknowledged are mostly ‘cranks, not to say completely vicious, while those who seem decent are rendered useless to the city because of (their) studies’— in the Middle Ages philosophy becomes a ticket to genuine influence and power. Philosophers such as Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, Saint Bonaventure and Saint Thomas Aquinas enjoy the sponsorship of an extremely powerful institution. They have excellent job security, and also the respect and admiration of the world. During the Middle Ages it’s unlikely that anyone asked philosophy students what they would do with their degree because there was a clear career

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track open to them, along with opportunities for real power, privilege and cultural authority. For one brief, shining moment philosophy was popular.

But there was a steep price to pay for this popularity. Since philosophy had to give up its autonomy and do as it was told it could no longer claim to be the love of all wisdom, without preconceived limits. In exchange for surrendering its autonomy philosophy became an arbiter and interpreter of popular culture, but this arrangement required such a blatant imbalance between its two guiding ideals that it proved unsustainable; and so eventually the unstable and unhappy marriage of philosophy and religion ended in divorce. The price of the popularity that philosophy purchased in the Middle Ages was an excessive, unproductive and ultimately unbearable tension that kept philosophy and institutional religion from ever being good friends, and that led inevitably to a nasty break up.

Act 3

There’s a very interesting phenomenon in contemporary philosophy that can be understood better when we consider what happened to philosophy in the Middle Ages. I refer to a certain style of applying philosophy to popular culture that is most immediately embodied by the three different series of ‘X and Philosophy’ books that are now published
by Blackwell, Open Court, and the University of Kentucky. I want to be very clear that I am not criticizing the philosophy of popular culture in general; only a particular style or approach to the philosophy of popular culture that has succeeded in becoming quite popular. While it is easiest to study this phenomenon initially by referring to the many ‘X and Philosophy’ books that have been published in the past few years, my intention is only to use those books as a means to understand something more basic and more general about philosophy itself. The ‘X and Philosophy’ books represent a certain subculture within the larger field of the philosophy of popular culture, a subculture dedicated primarily to popularizing philosophy. I will argue that this approach is fundamentally flawed and destined to fail. So as I discuss these books please keep in mind that this discussion is only a means to an end, an opportunity to understand something bigger: a mistake with very deep roots in the history of philosophy, and a mistake that remains a temptation and a trap which philosophy can easily fall into. The nature of this mistake – the larger target of this criticism – will become clear shortly.

The ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture began with the publication of *Seinfeld and Philosophy* in 1999, and since then ‘X and Philosophy’ books have appeared in rapid succession on everything from *SpongeBob SquarePants* to The Atkins Diet, Facebook, The
Boston Red Sox, *Battlestar Gallactica* and golf. Given the speed with which new titles appear (over 180 since 1999), and how well these books sell (*The Simpsons and Philosophy* has sold over half a million copies), the ‘X and Philosophy’ industry would seem to be one of the greatest success stories in the approximately 2600 year history of philosophy. It is at the very least an anomaly that begs to be explained, and I believe it can be explained as a fundamentally medieval project – a repetition of the experiment in popularizing philosophy that took place in the Middle Ages. What is happening in the ‘X and Philosophy’ movement is analogous to medieval philosophy in several respects.

First, like philosophy in the Middle Ages, the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture is constrained by the limitations of dogma and ritual. There are at least three distinct dogmas, and three corresponding rituals, that constrain philosophy within this subculture.

The first dogma is the unquestioned belief in the authority of fashion. This dogma translates into the following moral imperative: It is our highest duty as philosophers to immediately publish a book of essays on whatever is currently getting the most attention in the marketplace of popular culture. And there is no time to lose because the public has a very short attention span, so we must strike quickly or risk failing in our duty – because once a piece of pop-

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ular culture is no longer popular there is nothing left for philosophy to say about it. The demand for haste that is entailed by this dogma results in a fascinating ritual that has become quite well known since *Seinfeld and Philosophy* was published in 1999: as soon as an artifact of pop culture breaks out of the crowded field of mass entertainment and attains a certain aura of fame, a call for papers will quickly go forth from at least one (often more than one) of the ‘X and Philosophy’ book series. Everything is done in great haste, and the essays that appear in the volumes that are rushed to market generally sound like they were written under the looming threat of a deadline by authors who are breathlessly sprinting to finish as quickly as possible, since it is understood that no one knows the shelf life of the public’s interest, and it would be truly tragic if the book of essays didn’t appear until after its subject was already starting to fade from the public’s attention. There is a moral imperative to work fast before the window of opportunity that fame has opened slams shut.

The speed with which this entire process occurs makes it clear that fashion is guiding these editorial choices rather than any kind of serious reflection about the merit of the project, and from the privileged perspective of hindsight some of the pop culture ephemera that were chosen for analysis in the past now seem quite hilarious\(^9\). Just as in the Middle

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Ages philosophy became an employee of institutional religion, in the current ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture philosophy becomes the willing servant of whatever happens to be popular at the moment. The immediacy demanded by the dogma of fashion undermines the spirit of independent reflection in philosophy captured so well when Wittgenstein remarked, “This is how philosophers should salute each other: ‘Take your time!’”\(^{10}\) and also, ‘In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last’\(^{11}\).

A second dogma that limits the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture is the conviction that entertainment always takes precedence over insight. The moral imperative that follows from this article of faith is this: ‘The philosophy of popular culture must be just as entertaining as popular culture itself, and if possible even more so!’ It is understood that first and foremost philosophy must put on a good show, that it must entertain the audience. These convictions result in another fascinating ritual that has assumed a firmly established place in the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture: the sad spectacle of philosophers trying to tell jokes, craft witty puns, and generally assume the role of stand up comedians. While it is obvious

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\(^{11}\) *Ivi*, p. 34.
that all the writers for the ‘X and Philosophy’ books have struggled mightily to do their duty in this regard, the fruits of their labor have been meager and decidedly not entertaining. The desperate desire to entertain is evident in painful essay titles such as these: ‘Flatulence and Philosophy: A Lot of Hot Air, or the Corruption of Youth?; ‘The Sound of One House Clapping: The Unmannerly Doctor as Zen Rhetorician’; ‘Hey-diddily-ho, Neighboreenos: Ned Flanders and Neighborly Love’; ‘A (Karl, not Groucho) Marxist in Springfield’; and ‘Alfred, the Dark Knight of Faith: Batman and Kierkegaard’. These labored efforts to entertain provide additional documentation of a fact that has long been clearly manifest in the history of philosophy: that philosophers create the best comedy unintentionally, when they are trying to be serious. So all the effort expended to entertain in the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture is totally unnecessary, and from a practical standpoint not very successful; but more importantly the dogma that entertainment takes precedence over insight becomes a severe limitation. Here again, as in the Middle Ages, philosophy subordinates its one and only talent – independent analysis and insight – to a higher authority, in this case the authority of the entertainment industry.

A final dogma that constrains the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture is the conviction that philosophy is a means to an end but never an end in itself. As in the Middle ages, when philosophy was transformed
into a servant of theology – a stockpile of resources that could be put to work for the greater good of religion – in the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture the history of philosophy is treated like a warehouse of assorted ideas and arguments that can be deployed (in a hurry) to analyze the latest products of pop culture. In this enterprise philosophy is a subordinate employee that anxiously waits for something to do – for the chance to prove that it can handle the job. In the Middle Ages there was constant debate about the very idea of giving philosophy a job, of allowing it to play any role at all in the more godly enterprise of institutional religion. And when philosophy was allowed to play a part in religion it was generally treated as a strange and static collection of odd tools created and also completed by the Greeks, not as a living dialogue or a continuing conversation that is valuable as an end in itself. That same utilitarian approach is characteristic of the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture, which treats the history of philosophy as an odd collection of ideas from the past waiting to be put to work in the service of a higher good which is far more fashionable, entertaining and important than philosophy itself could ever hope to be.

These three dogmas and their corresponding rituals which permeate the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture enervate the productive tension between knowing yourself and knowing the world and thereby render philosophy irrelevant to individual subjects who want to understand themselves. It is
evident in all of these dogmas and rituals that, like medieval philosophy, the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture relies on a version of philosophy that simplifies and distorts philosophy’s true nature. As I argued at the outset of this essay, philosophy is by nature an unstable partnership of two lofty ideals that are naturally in tension. It has always been the case that philosophy could comment endlessly on any human activity, including works of pop culture, since philosophy chooses to position itself amidst the founding assumptions of all that humans care about. Every philosophical theory is a revision of the world, and so every philosopher with a new idea can immediately go into business interpreting the world in all of its minute and ephemeral details. The only thing that stands in the way of such an enterprise is the pressure exerted by the other founding demand of philosophy: to know yourself by means of independent thinking – for this leads immediately to the conclusion that time is a precious commodity, since the time of anyone’s life is finite, and therefore even though I can easily do a book length philosophical analysis of golf, the Boston Red Sox, or Sponge Bob Square pants, it’s probably not worth my time, because the opportunity cost is too high.

The tension that is relevant here is not the mostly imagined tension between so called high and low culture; rather it’s the very real and potentially productive tension between the desire to understand myself and the desire to understand the world. The
‘X and Philosophy’ subculture tries to eliminate that tension by largely silencing the demands of independent thinking. Thinking for yourself also entails thinking about yourself – the willingness to examine and reject the beliefs and values that you have used to structure your own existence. If philosophy tries to eliminate that tension by ignoring the demands of independent thinking, it may be able to achieve unprecedented popularity but it will simultaneously become utterly irrelevant to an individual thinker who wants to understand herself.

Another religious dimension of the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture that connects it to the Middle Ages is its evangelizing, proselytizing spirit. Defenders of the ‘X and Philosophy’ enterprise argue that their work should be seen as a kind of missionary undertaking – a way to spread the gospel of philosophy to the masses who otherwise would find it boring. Pop culture, it is argued, is just a convenient delivery mechanism, a way to get people to take their medicine. William Irwin, who edited the *Seinfeld and Philosophy* book, and has since served as the editor in chief of two of the three pop culture and philosophy book series currently in publication, summarizes the evangelizing argument thus: ‘As a discipline, we have had a public relations problem for a couple of centuries now, so engagement with popular culture is not an opportunity we can afford to miss’. The ‘mis-

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13 William Irwin, ‘Philosophy Engages Popular Culture: An Introduction’ in *Phi-
sion’ of the ‘X and Philosophy’ approach, he writes, is ‘reaching as many varied people as possible with philosophy’ instead of ‘preaching to the converted’\textsuperscript{14}.

This proselytizing paradigm seems to create an enormous blind spot in the world of ‘X and Philosophy.’ It seems to leave all those involved convinced, with a missionary zeal, that however arduous the task of converting the world to the value of philosophy by means of cranking out books on the latest pop culture ephemera with breakneck speed, unfortunately there is simply no other way to spre-


\textsuperscript{14} Op. cit. note 12, p. 50. Irwin has continued to defend the ‘X and Philosophy’ books that he began in various articles, most recently ‘Writing for the Reader: A Defense of Philosophy and Popular Culture Books.’ (\textit{Essays in Philosophy}, vol. 15. issue 1, 1/31/2014, pp. 77-85.) This latest essay is quite remarkable in that the only mention that is made of the Philosophy and Popular Culture Books that Irwin claims in the title to be defending, is in the first sentence where Irwin equates these books with ‘public philosophy,’ which he defines as the attempt to make philosophy understandable for non-specialists. Irwin then devotes the rest of the article to the not even remotely controversial thesis that it is better to write clearly than to write obscurely. The false equivalency upon which the article is predicated—that the ‘X and Philosophy’ books are nothing more than attempts to explain philosophy in clear language—leaves out the most obvious defining characteristic of these books: that they are always first and foremost about some currently fashionable artifact of popular culture and only secondarily about philosophy. Irwin’s argument in this essay will also seem quite bizarre to anyone who has read a few of the essays in the ‘X and Philosophy’ books, because the quality of the writing in those essays is almost universally quite bad, with abundant traces of the rush to get them published in a hurry, before the artifact in question ceases to be fashionable. It is also fascinating to note Irwin’s claim that: ‘The negative comments about the pop culture and philosophy series generally take the form of those made by the Pseudonymous blogger Spiros’—and he then cites a 2-paragraph blog post which basically says nothing more than ‘I don’t really like these books.’ (See: http://philosophersanon.blogspot.com/2009/04/doom-pop-culture-and-philosophy.html) This suggests that there has been no substantive criticism of these books, just a few negative ‘comments’ from anonymous cranks. This is a straw man attack which dismisses the very possibility of any kind of substantive criticism of the ‘X and Philosophy’ movement.
ad the gospel. This leads to overlooking so many other means of using philosophy to engage with popular culture in profound and productive ways. Here in no particular order are six examples of philosophy applied to popular culture in a manner that respects the guiding ideals of philosophy and yields genuine insights into the world. (1) Philosophers who have created works of their own in the media of popular culture such as novels, plays, films and TV programs. Some obvious examples here are the plays and novels of Jean-Paul Sartre\textsuperscript{15}, Albert Camus\textsuperscript{16}, Iris Murdoch\textsuperscript{17}, and Rebecca Newberger Goldstein\textsuperscript{18}. (2) Philosophers who have used popular culture as a way to clarify complicated theories. The most obvious example here is Slavoj Žižek, who has produced numerous books and films that very effectively use popular culture in this way\textsuperscript{19}. (3) Philosophers who have used philosophy to make sense of current events. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Hannah Arendt’s book \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}:

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A Report on the Banality of Evil. Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments on obedience that were inspired by Arendt’s analysis also stand out in this category, and Kierkegaard’s The Present Age belongs here as well. (4) Comic books or graphic novels which summarize philosophical theories in a way that makes them easier to understand and more obviously relevant to contemporary concerns without distorting the central ideas or arguments of these theories. Recently there have been several fine examples of this sort of work, such as Action Philosophers by Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey, Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth by Apostolos Doxiadis and Christos Papadimitriou, and Philosophy for Beginners by Richard Osborne and Ralph Edney. (5) Every version of applied philosophy is an effort to apply philosophy to the analysis of contemporary culture. Applied ethics fields such as medical ethics, business ethics, legal ethics, etc. are the most obvious examples. (6) Finally, philosophical aesthetics has a long

24 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).
25 (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1992). The ‘X for Beginners’ books started by Writers and Readers Publishing are often quite excellent, with engaging art along with accurate and succinct summaries of various philosophical theories. These books demonstrate that philosophy can remain true to itself while also taking full advantage of a medium of popular culture.
26 Gregory Pence continually updates his Classic Cases in Medical Ethics text to include new developments in medicine and new ‘classic cases’—case studies
history of taking popular culture seriously and using the tools of philosophy to analyze it. This is the area where philosophy and popular culture have established the most productive and mutually respectful relationship. The ‘X and Philosophy’ movement sometimes attempts to appropriate the aesthetic analysis of popular culture as if there were no difference between them, but they really are quite distinct forms of engagement with popular culture. Some noteworthy examples in this category are authors such as Arthur Danto and Noël Carroll who have a long history of thinking deeply about the aesthetic depths and dimensions of popular culture. Aesthetics textbooks, reflecting this longstanding tradition of engaging with popular culture, typically have numerous essays dealing with popular culture in all of its manifold forms.

Another problem with the proselytizing paradigm that guides the ‘X and Philosophy’ books is that, however noble the intentions of the project, it

that serve particularly well to crystalize a particular ethical issue in the field of modern medicine.

27 Rob Loftis points out that the book Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), which was intended to be something of a manifesto and exemplar for the ‘X and Philosophy’ movement, is largely composed of essays on the aesthetics of popular culture, and ‘aesthetics has been engaged with popular culture for a long time now.’ See his review of the book in Metapsychology Online Reviews, http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=4150, retrieved 4 March 2015.


seems clear that its practical results are very poor. If the goal is to persuade people that philosophy is something other than opportunistic sophistry it’s hard to imagine how books such as: *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy, Veronica Mars and Philosophy, Steve Jobs and Philosophy, and Lady Gaga and Philosophy* – will succeed in winning any new converts. If *Lady Gaga and Philosophy* really were someone’s very first exposure to philosophy what kind of conversion experience can we expect? Would someone really segue from reading *Lady Gaga and Philosophy* to a perusal of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Plato’s Republic, or any other work of actual philosophy? Isn’t it far more likely that a reading of *Lady Gaga and Philosophy*, especially if it were followed by some reflection on all the other titles in the various ‘X and Philosophy’ book series\(^{31}\), would lead one to the conclusion that philosophy is a strange kind of cultural parasite that anxiously awaits the next popular TV show or pop singer so that it can quickly produce another collection of essays to entertain the masses?

Such a project is reminiscent of the performance of the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in Plato’s dialogue *Euthydemus*. Their routine is so practiced and polished that they can put on a show using whatever topic anyone might propose.

But after watching them perform Socrates comments:

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\(^{31}\) Again, please see the appendix for a complete current list.
These things are the frivolous part of study and I call these things frivolity because even if a man were to learn many or all such things he would be none the wiser as to how matters stand. So you must think of their performance as having been mere play.

Doesn’t it also seem clear that the primary reason any of these books sell is because the title induces some surprise and laughter by incongruously combining something that is currently very popular with – of all things – philosophy, which has never been popular? It’s as if Lady Gaga suddenly announced that she is dating a 45 year old grad student named Brad who has been writing a dissertation on Hegel for the past 13 years: the news would be surprising, perhaps even somewhat funny, and for a brief moment it would grab the public’s attention. But even these incongruous and amusing titles fail to be effective proselytizing tools. They will generate surprise and laughter only for someone who already knows something about philosophy – perhaps because she once tried to read the Critique of Pure Reason and found it very difficult – and so any preaching that the books effect is only preaching to the choir. For

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33 I will hazard a guess that the vast majority of the pop culture and philosophy books that have been printed since 1999 were given away essentially as gag gifts to people who were already dedicated fans of the pop culture in question and found it slightly funny—worth at least one short laugh—to consider their favorite TV show as the incongruous object of somber philosophical reflection. If this is true then most of these books were never read. They were purchased because their title was funny; no one paid any attention to the contents of the
those who are not already converted, this missionary undertaking seems likely to win converts only for the view that philosophy is nothing more than a sophisticated spectacle meant to entertain, and perhaps earn a little money in the process.

The (Unhappy) Ending

The final analogue between the ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture and medieval philosophy has been implicit in all of the analysis so far but it now needs to be rendered completely, even painfully, explicit because this is the primary underlying problem with the ‘X and Philosophy’ style of the philosophy of popular culture. This version of the philosophy of popular culture is primarily interested in using the popularity of popular culture to make philosophy popular. Popularizing philosophy is the primary purpose of this project, not knowledge, insight or wisdom. Such a project is a misguided attempt to transform philosophy into something that it never has been, and never can be. Thus it reflects a fundamental lack of self-knowledge on the part of philosophy, which makes philosophy look rather ridiculous, and it creates only confusion about how philosophy can be used to study popular culture. I will elaborate on all of these assertions in the remainder of the paper.
First of all, it is simply an empirical fact that philosophy – when it has been true to its nature – has never been popular. Thales was the first philosopher, and also the first person to be ridiculed for being a philosopher. A witty and attractive Thracian servant-girl is said to have mocked Thales for falling into a well while he was observing the stars and gazing upwards; declaring that he was eager to know the things in the sky, but that what was behind him and just by his feet escaped his notice.

The only moment in the 2600 year history of philosophy when philosophy was not regarded as a marginal, unpopular, and somewhat ridiculous activity occurred in the Middle Ages, when philosophy gave up on maintaining any kind of sustainable balance between its competing ideals and thus effectively ceased to be philosophy.

Secondly, by its very nature philosophy is precluded in principle from being popular. As Bertrand Russell explained in his oft-quoted essay, ‘The Value of Philosophy’, it is philosophy’s fate to be forever ridiculed by witty and attractive Thracian servant-girls, and everyone else who finds philosophy absurd because it yields no certain answers – because whenever some subfield within philosophy does begin to get results it is instantly spun off into the latest practical science. ‘As soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and now becomes a separate science’.

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philosophy is to be studied’, Russell continued, ‘not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good’.

This is the same aspect of philosophy that Schopenhauer referred to when he argued that philosophy can never be popular because,

\[\text{the philosopher’s work [...] tries to revolutionize the reader’s whole mode of thought. It demands of him that he shall acknowledge as error all that he has hitherto learnt and believed [...] that he shall declare all his time and trouble to be wasted; and that he shall begin again at the beginning.}\]

The self-examination entailed by independent thinking doesn’t require that philosophy become a solipsistic activity with no interest in understanding the world; that would also be an unbalanced and distorted version of philosophy that tries to silence

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36 *Ivi*, p. 1095.

the natural tension between the desire to know yourself and the desire to know the world. Instead, the greatest works in the history of philosophy have been created when this tension became a productive force that generated a dialogue between the individual thinker and her world.

The pursuit of popularity only serves to make philosophy ridiculous. When philosophy does this the incongruity is really quite breathtaking: philosophy, the discipline that enjoins everyone to know themselves, demonstrates that it is utterly ignorant of itself. And the blame for such a comical misunderstanding rests entirely on philosophy, not on popular culture, which got dragged into this marriage without its consent. Any attempt to use the philosophy of popular culture to make philosophy popular simply backfires and makes philosophy look quite silly. Philosophy can only be popular by selling its soul, as it did in the Middle Ages; in other words philosophy can only become popular when it ceases to be philosophy.

The ‘X and Philosophy’ books are a fascinating project that demonstrates the power of philosophy to talk about anything. But all of the analogues with medieval philosophy suggest that this marriage of philosophy and pop culture is not particularly healthy. Medieval philosophy was a serious and thorough experiment conducted over the course of a millennium that explored the possibility of popularizing philosophy, and the results were quite conclusive: it did not end well. I’m not suggesting
that philosophy should ignore pop culture or that there is nothing philosophical in pop culture; but the current ‘X and Philosophy’ subculture is too medieval in its attempts to engage with pop culture and therefore does philosophy a disservice. Though philosophy has indeed had a public relations problem for a couple of centuries now, this particular engagement with popular culture tries to turn philosophy into something that it can never be – popular – and in the process strips philosophy of its true relevance and value.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{38} A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 35th annual Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference February 22, 2014 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I wish to thank the audience at that presentation for their comments and suggestions.
Appendix

Books published to date in the three current philosophy and pop culture series

(1) The Open Court Philosophy and Pop Culture Series

• Titles published to date

Arp, Robert, Psych and Philosophy, Open Court, Chicago 2013.

Arp Robert, The Devil and Philosophy, Open Court, Chicago 2014.

Arp Robert, Homeland and Philosophy, Open Court, Chicago 2014.


Carveth Rod, *Justified and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago 2015.

Cogburn Jon, Silcox Mark, *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago 2012.


Lewis Courtland, Young Shawn P., *Futurama and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago 2013.


Nicholas Jeffery, *Dune and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago 2011.

Porter Carl, Vernezze Peter, *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Thinking)*, Open Court, Chicago 2006.


Ralkowski Mark, *Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy*, Open Court, Chicago 2012.


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The Philosophy of Popular Culture and the Unpopularity of Philosophy