The Misgivings of a Pop Culture Enthusiast: On the intersection of philosophy and entertainment

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Abstract:

In recent years, dozens of books on philosophy and popular culture have been published. These books have been subjected to a number of criticisms in a number of venues—including other popular philosophy venues. In this paper, I will examine several versions of the criticism that such endeavors are frivolous entertainment. I will argue that, though most of these criticisms do not stand up to scrutiny, they nevertheless express a legitimate worry about the intercourse of philosophy and entertainment. This, I contend, is a criticism the 'philosophy and popular culture' genre must live with—and one that cannot easily be dismissed.

Keywords: popular philosophy, pop culture, entertainment, Postman, critical theory

Imagine a world...

Imagine for a moment the following: hell-bent on the destruction of philosophy, several ne'er-do-well PhDs get together with the aim of destroying the discipline. Their strategy: to release a series of books that put the standard tools of philosophy on display, highlighting some of philosophy's central questions and answers, introducing some of philosophy's most famous practitioners, and exploring the arguments they've offered. But, scandalous as it may seem, these PhDs want to make these questions *accessible*. That means leaving out technicality, and ignoring the difficult details. In other words, these revolutionaries will bring to publishing what they already bring to undergraduate instruction: a first-pass at the issues at stake, hoping to whet the appetites of those they encounter.

Philosophy is an old discipline. Our rogue PhDs know that defeating her will not be easy. She has survived execution, censorship, and countless announcements of her death. She even survived Wittgenstein 'ending' her—twice. The key to the death of the discipline is dazzlingly simplistic: these *espiegle* academicians have decided to show that philosophy isn't just for the well-trained, and it isn't just something one does in a college classroom. They've decided to make philosophy apply to *absolutely everything,* and to show that it is relevant *to absolutely everyone.* In this way, these hateful 'philosophers' are convinced they will kill the love of wisdom once and for all.

This is an exaggerated version of the kind of argument one sometimes hears about the various 'and philosophy' books that have been getting published in recent years[1]: pop culture cheapens

philosophy, making it appear as frivolous, dispensable nonsense. When the gloves come off, we hear the further criticism that these books are not 'real' philosophy—or worse still, that they are *incompetent* philosophy.[2]

Few would deny that there's a difference between academic philosophy and popular philosophy, though this difference is harder to locate than one might initially suspect. One difference between pop philosophy and the more academic variety is, of course, *style.* But this isn't the entire story. Very few would object to a writer demonstrating his or her stylistic chops, even in the confines of the academy. A great many academic philosophers are stylists of the highest order (think Mill, Rorty, Quine). Moreover, a great many canonized philosophers of the past put style on a par with content (think Plato, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard). Indeed, philosophy as a form of popular writing is nearly as old as philosophy itself.[3] Objections to popular philosophy are very seldom objections to philosophy that garners a wide audience.

And yet the objections express a very real worry—one that emerges as we, as a profession, confront the rather unflattering public perception of our chosen discipline.

In some ways, the situation for philosophy seems dire: Nobel Laureates claim philosophy has got nothing to offer;[4] television personalities make fun of it; op-eds suggest it is an outmoded artifact no longer useful (if it ever was) to degree-seeking students.

For their part, proponents of philosophy and pop culture are usually forthright about what it is that they're trying to do. The oft-stated aim of pop philosophy that utilizes pop culture is "to provide students with the skills and the desire to engage in serious philosophical reading and reflection on their own" (Bassham and Austin 2008, 7). These skills, in turn, are lauded as necessary for building a better society.[5]

I feel no need to defend philosophy in this context. My question, rather, is this one: is there any reason to be worried about using pop culture as a way of introducing the general public to philosophy? Is there any truth behind the hyperbole of the conspiratorial objection with which we began? I think there is some truth to it—but not perhaps where critics believe. When philosophy attempts to add some reflection to an entertainment culture by engaging that culture on its own terms, it risks itself. This is a legitimate worry. Seeing why and how this worry emerges is, in my view, the best way to understand it.[6]

Two approaches to the popularization of philosophy: the birth of a tension

The United States is characterized by a stunning philosophically illiteracy.[7] The standard images of the philosopher are of the old white-male—robed, tunic-ed or toga-ed—staring off into the distance, pondering the imponderables. And yet the story of Thales, if it were known to the general public, might well resonate: Thales, the legend has it, was so absorbed in thought that he didn't notice the well he was approaching—and fell into it. Fixated on the operations of the heavens, Thales became blind to the realities of the world. Our cultural conception of the philosopher is decidedly Thalesian: the philosopher is so lost in esoteric thought that he cannot see the world around him; his abstraction blinds him to reality; he falls into wells when he encounters them.[8]

The many forms of popular philosophy—the blog, the op-ed, the 'pop culture and philosophy' books, the other attempts at mass appeal—have this much in common: they aim to make philosophy relevant to our daily lives. The *way* they do this, of course, differs remarkably. The philosophical public intellectual tries to bring the tools of philosophy directly to bear on the issues of the day: animal welfare, torture, social and economic equality, racism and sexism. The hope is that philosophy—here understood as the careful and critical examination of evidence and argument in order to discern the appropriate courses of action—will be palatable enough on its own, provided it's stripped of its often burdensome technical vocabulary. On the other end of the public philosophy spectrum, an attempt has been made to show how philosophical questions arise *everywhere*—and hence to demonstrate, somewhat indirectly, that the tools of philosophy are not as esoteric or impractical as one might think. This is a core motivation behind the many 'and philosophy' books that have now found their way into bookstores around the world. In both cases—the public philosopher and the pop culture enthusiast—the philosopher tries to keep Thales out of the well.

But the strategies differ. On the one hand, the public philosopher argues that the issues at stake are simply too important to ignore the significant advantages of philosophical education. Solving the problems of the world requires utilizing precisely those skills the study of philosophy is meant to provide: critical acumen, independent and creative thinking, and a concern for good reasoning. On the other hand, given the philosophical illiteracy of our culture and the negative public perception of philosophy, simply insisting on philosophy's value isn't likely to convince anyone. To get folks to employ the skills of philosophy, we've got to get them to understand what philosophy is, and how it can be used to tackle a host of current issues. To do this, though, we must engage people where their interests lie—and they lie in the popular cultural artifacts of our age.[9]

The public philosopher worries that his credentials aren't taken seriously; that his use of philosophical methods has been de-legitimated by a culture that esteems and degrades religion and science in equal parts, but which has no place for something called 'philosophy.' The pop culture enthusiast wants to change the public perception of philosophy too, but wants to do this by making philosophy as accessible as can be, and by meeting folks where they already are: in front of their televisions, reading their mass paperbacks and graphic novels, listening to Metallica and the Rolling Stones.

There is obviously a potential for tension between these approaches—and the tension has often been explicitly expressed. The worry is that the pop culture enthusiast demeans philosophy—makes it frivolous—by applying it to television shows, vampire novels, and blockbuster films. The worry is that such uses of philosophy will make it *more difficult* to get philosophy taken seriously by the public at large. The charge is thus sometimes made that the 'philosophy and pop culture' genre is actually doing the opposite of what it is trying to do—it is perpetuating the misconception that philosophy has nothing to offer, that it is pointless—that it is just so much more entertainment.

Culture Wars, Popular Philosophy Style

Maurice Natanson once said that "academic philosophy may be the last stronghold of subsidized madness." (1986, 2) Remarkably, he made this claim in a work of academic philosophy, albeit one with more style than most such publications can claim. Some of this madness gets expressed in often biting criticism of the genre of pop culture and philosophy. Indeed, this genre has become an occasion for some of the mad to sharpen their fangs. One blogger ('Spiros') bares his fangs as follows:

> The past several weeks have brought an incredible number of "calls for abstracts" for volumes in the various "pop culture and philosophy" series. As I've argued previously on this blog, these books are an embarrassment to our profession and should be boycotted. The enterprise reached a new low, however, this morning with the announcement of a volume on *Spider Man and Philosophy*.
> Yes, at first the idea of such a volume seems no more stupid and useless than the others. But wait. As is typical, the "call for abstracts" includes a rather long and random list of silly suggested paper topics. In addition to the obvious suggestions-- which involve nothing more than taking a perennial philosophical question and inserting Spider-Man into it (e.g., "Spider-Man and the problem of evil"; "Spider-Man and personal identity")-- there is the suggestion that one might write a paper on "Just how does Spidey-sense work?"
> Finally the series becomes aware of itself: An open invitation to utter bullshit.[10]

This is followed up by a 'comments' section that is brutally mean, where *ad hominem* attacks emerge in the guise of genuine empirical observation:

> All one has to do is take a look at any of the volumes to find that they're a haven for the incompetent.[11]

In response to a comment that attempts to defend these books, the anonymous philosopher ('Spiros') writes:

> To be sure, there are a few good things that happen to appear in these volumes. But on the whole, they're very, very bad: poorly written, poorly argued bullshitting, all under the deluded self-description of making philosophy "relevant" (by doing it poorly).[12]

As much as I'd like to pick on Spiros' remarks,[13] I think his blog contributes to the popularization of philosophy in one of its most central functions: critique. Besides, I actually *love* Spiros' blog—it's irreverent, cranky, and full of fun-loving cynicism. The interesting question, from my point of view, is what motivates the criticisms of pop culture books on a website that is itself attempting to bring a cranky variety of philosophy to bear on popular culture? Why do some people so vehemently hate this kind of popularizing of philosophy? What motivates one commenter to call the pedagogical efforts of the 'philosophy and pop culture' books 'pop fluff wankery'?

As these by-no-means isolated comments suggest, some professional philosophers worry that the work carried out under the auspices of 'philosophy and popular culture' is both frivolous and dangerous. It is frivolous, one might argue, because it makes philosophical labor seem to be more a matter of entertainment than a matter of serious scholarly activity. It is dangerous because these series have been astonishingly successful. From the point of view of the critic, then, such books are encouraging the view that philosophy itself is a matter of entertainment, and hence needn't be taken seriously. In a culture where philosophy is often seen as dispensable, or even worse as outright self-indulgent navel-gazing, philosophy and pop culture books thus sometimes seem to constitute more ammunition in the on-going assault against significant philosophical work.

And yet, what likely lies behind this hatred of the genre is a legitimate fear that the humanities are and will continue to be increasingly marginalized in cultural conversations. As philosophy departments are threatened with being shut-down (and then often are shut-down) because philosophy is regarded as irrelevant, it may be natural to think that books like *X-Men and Philosophy* or *Twilight and Philosophy* are contributing to an untenable conception of philosophy as merely entertainment. Is there anything to this claim?

Philosophy as/and Entertainment

To demonstrate that the pop culture genre of philosophy diminishes philosophy's public reputation, reducing it to mere entertainment, we'd also need to demonstrate, first, that the activities of professional philosophers do *not* contribute to the view that philosophy is mere entertainment. Second, we'd need to demonstrate that philosophy was taken more seriously *before* the release of books on philosophy and popular culture. If we couldn't show this, there would be no way to be certain that the 'pop culture' books were uniquely responsible for the public perception of philosophy as frivolous and inconsequential. And, to be blunt, I don't think it's possible to show either thing.

As noted above, a philosophical illiteracy characterizes American culture. That illiteracy, at least in part, stems from the specialization we find in every discipline—it is by no means unique to philosophy. Every discipline has its own language—its own set of established positions, and its established way of talking about them. As with any technical enterprise, philosophy has developed a technical language that is utterly foreign to the uninitiated.[14]

Our esoteric, technical languages are certainly part of the problem. An arcane, jargon-heavy vocabulary can make us seem, well, *irrelevant*. Most people have no sense of what philosophers actually do, let alone why they're doing it, or why it might matter. To many people (and here I'm offering only anecdotal evidence), professional philosophy really is just *entertainment*. We are viewed as engaging in boutique questions with boutique answers, and arguing about things that do not require argumentation. Do the activities of professional philosophers contribute to the view that philosophy is merely entertainment? Unfortunately, given the above considerations, the answer is likely 'yes'—not mass entertainment, to be sure, but *elitist* entertainment. We are too often seen as simply an irrelevant discipline. Given our irrelevance, members of the discipline—so the thinking

goes—are simply navel-gazing. Since what we do does not matter, we must be merely entertaining ourselves (this dominant perception of philosophy makes the exceptions truly exceptional).[15]

Philosophy has always been taken seriously—perhaps too seriously—by some of its practitioners. But well before *Seinfeld and Philosophy* hit the shelves, the profession was busy worrying about its place in the popular imagination—and it was pointing fingers. Who's to blame for the way the profession is perceived? Today, as we've seen, some blame (in part) the philosophy and pop culture books.[16] But one can with equal plausibility argue that philosophy is not taken seriously because it has become so terribly esoteric. It has become, in part, the working out of puzzles—puzzles often generated by philosophizing itself—and we have done a poor job, as a discipline and in general, explaining how our puzzle-mongering connects with real-world issues. Or with anything, really.[17]

The view that the use of pop culture diminishes philosophy, then, faces an important objection: philosophy is *already* diminished in popular consciousness, and has been for a long time. If we make introductory philosophy entertaining, the pop culture enthusiast contends, we might at least expand awareness of the issues and skills that characterize the discipline. It's worth asking the question explicitly: is there something wrong with entertainment?

Philosophers like Montaigne and Nietzsche are among the few who have defended the value of entertainment—at least when this is construed in terms of something like playful amusement. Montaigne, for example, provides a more-or-less utilitarian argument for entertainment. As Shusterman characterizes Montaigne's view, "entertainment's diversion of mind is not a necessarily negative feature that diminishes the mind by distracting its attention but rather, in dialectical fashion, strengthens the mind's powers by providing it with both relief and alternative exercise in changing the focus and style of its activity" (Shusterman 2007, 137).

Of course, the fact that entertainment can be of instrumental value is probably not something too many philosophers would reject. The bigger issue is whether or not the pop culture genre has benefits that outweigh its drawbacks. If people who read philosophy and pop culture books are provided with "alternative exercises" that change "the focus and style" of their mental activity, even if only temporarily, this might count as a real benefit. But this general argument would also apply to *other* forms of entertainment—to *Seinfeld* itself, with or without philosophy.

To make the case that philosophy through pop culture has a distinct value as entertainment would require showing how it goes beyond the entertainment of other forms of popular culture. Thus, even a general defense of entertainment would not necessarily be a defense of philosophical entertainment. Indeed, it appears that defending this particular mode of entertainment requires showing that it is *unlike* all of the other readily available modes. If entertainment has its own value, in other words, it doesn't need philosophy to make it valuable.

I want to return, albeit very briefly, to the issue of context. If philosophical texts are a kind of dialogue between text and reader, and this dialogue, in proper Gadamerian fashion, can shape the person encountering a text, the question of whether or not pop philosophy has an effect on its readers will fundamentally hinge on *who the readers are.*

This is presumably a familiar point: whether or not a piece of writing is 'entertainment' is a largely contextual matter. Consider for a moment Plato's *Phaedrus.* In the dialogue, Plato's Socrates distinguishes entertainment from philosophy. Philosophy is what occurs in living dialogue; entertainment is what is written down to amuse. Ironically, Plato draws this contrast in a text that winds up being an *instance* of entertainment, rather than an instance of philosophy. (True philosophy, Socrates claims, cannot be written down. It can only occur in living dialogue. Plato's writing is thus not true philosophy, on this account, though it is certainly an *invitation* to engage in true philosophical activity).

Entertainment, on one reading, is just amusement—or that which amuses. It is often used in a pejorative sense implying that what is entertaining is in fact a distraction from those things in life that actually matter. In *Phaedrus,* what matters is the active exchange that occurs in dialogue (as opposed to the mere recitation of speeches that have been prepared in advance). Such speeches (like the one Phaedrus himself recites) do not aspire to true philosophical engagement. It has, rather, all the marks of mere amusement: it is passive, something one witnesses and consumes rather than something one actively participates in. True philosophy, Plato tells us, is *never passive.*

It is this conception of entertainment that undergirds the many criticisms of it we find in thinkers like Adorno, Heidegger, Arendt, Postman, and others. In the case of Plato, however, the critique applies to *Plato's own writings.* A written account of a dialogue is not a dialogue; a snapshot of a philosophical exchange is not a philosophical exchange. And yet, it would be absurd to think that Plato's writings are worthless simply because they meet one criterion of entertainment. Certainly Plato himself did not think that, despite the claim that he 'never wrote his true philosophy.'[18] Plato's works were, rather, an invitation to engage in proper philosophy. These invitations have been incredibly, though of course not uniformly, successful. Their success has much to do with their ability to entertain, and their ability to entertain has everything to do with their *style.* Consider the absurdity, again from *Phaedrus,* of Socrates' recitation of a speech while covering his head with a sheet. Or consider the account of female education in *Republic,* where Plato speaks of women 'riding studs while they're naked'—the clear sexual innuendo as present in the Greek as it is in the English. Such amusements are not incidental to Plato's texts. Plato aims to entertain *so that* his readers will be drawn into true philosophical engagement.[19]

Although this is precisely the aim of the 'and philosophy book,' it is somewhat perverse to compare these books to Plato's work. In Plato's writings, philosophy is *never* incidental. One cannot imagine Plato without the philosophical content. One *can* imagine *Family Guy,* or *The Office,* or *30 Rock* without it. One can philosophize in these arenas, to be sure, but the philosophy does not make them what they are. So, while the aim of such series has a powerful pedigree, it is disingenuous to suggest that they are therefore innocent by association.

The question thus remains: do these books manage to get beyond merely amusing? Pop culture enthusiasts should be prepared to admit that sometimes the 'and philosophy' books do not get beyond amusement. Sometimes they are just entertainment. Although essays in these books can

be excellent, they can also be formulaic. In every volume, one finds, undeniably and perhaps inevitably, the formulaic application of famous theories to more-or-less routine popular scenarios: one would be hard-pressed to find *anything* involving human action that really couldn't be bludgeoned into illustrating utilitarianism. As readers deeply familiar with utilitarianism (or the mind/body problem, or the issue of freewill, or whatever), professional philosophers are more likely to regard these contributions as, well, not really contributions to the scholarly conversation. And they would be right, at least usually. But one person's mere entertainment is another person's window into something novel and stimulating. A standard introduction to utilitarianism, applied formulaically to some piece of pop culture, might well bore a reader of this piece to tears. But it might also provoke an entirely different reaction from someone who happened to be new to philosophy, or who had no familiarity with any of the 'literatures' we refer to when we do scholarship.

Is this enough to answer the objection? Can we simply point out that some entertainment might still be education to some readers, and leave it at that? I think there is a legitimate worry about the genre that lurks beyond the complaints we've so far been considering—and one that the genre must simply live with.

Entertaining philosophy (to death)

Philosophy ought to be engaging—but being engaging isn't the same as being entertaining. If Frankfurt School style philosophy excelled at anything, it certainly excelled at making this distinction—both on the page and in practice. Indeed, the criticism of so-called 'mass culture' became its own industry among the emigrant philosophers of Germany: Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man,* Adorno's *The Culture Industry,* and work by Hannah Arendt all pointed to the same thing: the growth of an industry designed merely to entertain us is a sign of cultural decline. As Arendt described mass culture:

> Its promoters are neither the masses nor their entertainers, but are those who try to entertain the masses with what once was an authentic object of culture, or to persuade them that *Hamlet* can be as entertaining as *My Fair Lady*, and educational as well. The danger of mass education is precisely that it may become very entertaining indeed; there are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say. (Arendt 1960, 284-285).

Neil Postman took up Arendt's criticisms and then applied them to television in what remains a very satisfying book. *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* in its way, captures the core problems with the notion of entertainment. Postman offers what he calls 'the three commandments of television'—commandments that may, with some modification, apply to the category of 'entertainment' in general:

1. Thou shalt have no pre-requisites ("the learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice…television is a nongraded curriculum and excludes no viewer for any reason, at any time…[it] undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself" (Postman 1985, 147))
2. Thou shalt induce no perplexity ("there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or, worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount" (147-148).
3. Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt ("Arguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio or, worse, third-rate printed matter…Nothing will be taught on television that cannot both be visualized and placed in a theatrical context" (148)).

Postman explicitly claims that "the name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity, and exposition is entertainment" (148). And there are some striking similarities between the 'commandments of television' and the instructions given to contributors in, for example, Blackwell's Pop Culture and Philosophy series: accessibility, clarity, and an injunction not to stray too far from the target piece of pop culture (no more than a couple pages without referring to it!). But there are obvious differences, too: every essay in the pop culture and philosophy genre *does* take up arguments and objections. It *does* engage in exposition, albeit exposition that anchors itself to its favored piece of pop culture. Writers in the genre are almost always at pains to note that they are *introducing* philosophy, not exhaustively displaying it. For whatever their limitations, the 'and philosophy' books maintain a foot in the 'print culture' that Postman idealizes.

Nevertheless, as Postman argues, the entertainment culture that surrounds us is not to be ignored—it shapes even our relation to the printed word. Arendt and Postman are not simply being curmudgeonly. They argue, rather, that certain sorts of thinking are intrinsically difficult, and that to make such things palatable to the masses will involve stripping them of those (difficult) characteristics that make them what they are. The true enemy of wisdom is not ignorance, Socrates says, but false knowledge. By presenting philosophical issues as entertainment, we encourage a false knowledge of the difficulty (and profundity) of philosophical reflection. It is seen as one more game people can play with language, except this time on a terrain of familiar distractions.

Is this different in principle from what we do in undergraduate instruction? The answer to this question has surprisingly wide-ranging implications. A philosophy professor who aimed at the entertainment of students might produce a greater knowledge of philosophy, but nevertheless promote a conception of philosophy as something to be consumed, or something to be engaged in recreationally, or something to be done when nothing good is on television. To paraphrase Postman's worry about television: the problem isn't that philosophy can be entertaining; the problem is that it won't be anything else. Or to paraphrase McLuhan: the medium destroys the message.

This is philosophy's version of a standoff: the pop culture enthusiast insists that using pop culture will increase philosophical literacy, and hence make available the tools of philosophical reflection for a larger audience. The pop culture pessimist thinks that the use of pop culture will increase philosophical *illiteracy,* as it encourages a conception of philosophy as just so much more entertainment—and entertainment encourages the easy, the shallow, the banal. Wherever one's hopes lie, the objections and the hopes are both serious ones.

There are two replies to this standoff that are worth considering. First, we ought to remember that Plato was not above employing entertainment for the very use we're now considering—to encourage further philosophical reflection. The Platonic dialogue was (on one reading) designed to get people to engage further in philosophical training (by coming to the Academy, for example). Plato himself also saw the danger in knowing too little philosophy: it would encourage a garrulous spirit that wasn't guided by the 'love of truth,' and persisted only in a desire to win arguments. This, to my mind, is a vindication of *both sides* of the standoff: entertainment *can* increase interest in philosophy, but it can also be dangerous. We are, of course, in a very different media environment from the one Plato saw. Plato regarded even *writing itself* as a threat to true philosophical exchange. We are in a much more dangerous position now, to be sure. But if our consistent danger is that we pass over all things without attention, regarding them only as more amusement, it must matter that some amusements are more reflective than others. Even if philosophy has become entertainment, it is at least *reflective* entertainment.

And this leads directly to another point: in a culture such as ours, it may be impossible to avoid *beginning* with an instrumentalized, entertainment-driven version of philosophy. If we take seriously the Heideggerian problem of enframing, or the Marcusian/Horkheimerian diagnosis of an eclipse of reason, or, indeed, Postman's *Brave New World* diagnosis of being amused to death, there may be no other way into philosophy except through the gauntlet of entertainment (doing x because x is fun). This is lamentable for many reasons, but it is, I daresay, better than nothing.

Nevertheless, I think the worry raised by Arendt (and Postman, Adorno, Marcuse, and others) is one that we ought to take seriously. If we begin in entertainment, we might not be able to escape it. Sometimes, for some readers, I'm sure we won't. If the medium shapes the message, as both Arendt and Postman (and McLuhan!) insist, presenting philosophy as entertainment may well change the very nature of what is presented—much like the use of images changed advertising, commercial breaks changed the news, and hyperlinks changed reading.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this worry is somehow uniquely appropriate in this particular genre of popular philosophy. The very same critique potentially applies to everything that garners a wide audience: we are a culture of entertainment, and through entertainment, we may (inadvertently) change the very things that are colonized by entertainment: the news, education, politics, and yes, philosophy. This is a critique that ought to be made—and ought to be made again and again. It is a critique that points to a significant problem in our culture, but the critique is in itself not a solution. Applied to the use of pop culture to popularize philosophy,

it is a critique of a symptom of a culture obsessed with entertainment. The critique is no different, in principle, from the critique of hyperbolic assertions designed to excite the attention of would-be readers—and this happens in a great many varieties of popular philosophy: the op-ed, the intro book, and even in the journal article that promises, in its title, to defend some bizarre view.

If the critique of the entertainment culture is correct, the 'and philosophy' books are guilty—but they are no more guilty than any other version of popular philosophy. The fact that philosophy must prostitute itself to popular culture to get noticed in such a culture, while lamentable in many respects, may nevertheless be unavoidable: one must entertain to be noticed by anyone but the specialist. The choice of the public philosopher may thus come down to a Faustian bargain of sorts: entertain, thereby risking the debasement of the very thing you hope to encourage, or die in the anonymity of a culture that will settle for nothing less.

And now, this...

To those outside of the discipline, *most* philosophy looks frivolous—that's precisely the problem. Whether or not the pop culture genre exacerbates this problem is, ultimately, an empirical question—and one not easy to answer. I think the objections should be taken seriously. As someone who participates in the production of philosophical entertainment, I *am* worried about the potential effects wrought by our entertainment culture on all things sacred, or at least all things serious. But I am equally worried about a world where philosophical thinking is sequestered in academic journals, and entertainment culture faces no attempt at critical thinking. I am worried about a world where only the truly devoted are able to know anything at all about the discipline I have given much of my life to. The 'and philosophy' books should be understood, in my view, as part of the attempt to combat an entertainment culture from *within* that culture—even if we risk undermining such attempts with the very strategies we employ.[20]

Endnotes:

1. One doesn't usually hear much about a conspiratorial plot (I added that bit for fun), but the core criticisms are the same.
2. Are these books really filled with 'incompetence'? A competent contribution to scholarship is one that makes advances—that deals with technical argumentative moves, surveys and responds to the existing literature. But to judge the genre on this criterion makes little sense. These books aim to introduce philosophy, not to advance the state of scholarship. To claim that the pop culture books are incompetent as an *introduction* to the central issues of philosophy, moreover, is simply ridiculous. I have never read a single contribution to such a book that was not competent. To be sure, I have disagreed with particular claims about, say, how to understand the significance of the unity of the virtues in Aristotle. But I have never seen a chapter that involved gross misrepresentations of central claims, or arguments, or even the lay of the theoretical landscape. This is hardly surprising. The vast majority of contributions come from persons with PhDs in the discipline, and all come from people with extensive graduate training. If these persons could not competently present basic philosophical ideas, the discipline would have a much more significant problem than our culture's current philosophical illiteracy. The problem would be that our graduate programs in philosophy were unable to produce competent teachers.

3. The genre of the Socratic dialogue, it must be remembered, was a *popular genre.* Nevertheless, it would be delusional to think that the volumes of popular philosophy now available are full of Plato-worthy writing. They simply aren't. Of course, the same could be said of *any* series of contemporary books.
4. Stephen Hawking made this claim, though he is hardly alone.
5. William Irwin has suggested this in a number of places—in his *Psychology Today* blog, for example.
6. In the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that I have edited (or co-edited) six books in Blackwell's Philosophy & Pop Culture Series: *Family Guy and Philosophy* (2007), *The Office and Philosophy* (2008), *X-Men and Philosophy* and *Twilight and Philosophy* (2009, both co-edited with Rebecca Housel), *30 Rock and Philosophy* (2010), and *Arrested Development and Philosophy* (2012, co-edited with Kristopher Phillips).
7. Carlin Romano's recent *America the Philosophical* notwithstanding.
8. The use of the masculine pronoun 'he' is intentional. 80% of professional philosophers in the US are male, compared to 60% across the academy. This has long been recognized (by some, at any rate) as a significant problem for the discipline. Our collective exclusion of minority groups of various kinds certainly does not aid the cause of public philosophy.
9. Plato's own approach to philosophical writing seems to have involved a fusion of both approaches. Plato applies the tools of philosophy to social and political questions, but he also utilizes many of the dramatic and comedic tropes of his day.
10. http://philosophersanon.blogspot.com/2009/04/doom-pop-culture-and-philosophy.html Last accessed June, 2016.
11. http://philosophersanon.blogspot.com/2009/04/doom-pop-culture-and-philosophy.html Last accessed June, 2016.
12. The first question one might ask is this: why has this blogger read so many of these books if he truly thinks they're worthless? The answer, of course, is that he hasn't. He probably has not read a single volume, let alone multiple. This doesn't mean he's wrong. Perhaps, like a number of essays in the pop culture books, he's attempting to illustrate a topic of philosophical interest: induction maybe, or the fallacy of hasty generalization.
13. By, for example, highlighting how vague the criticisms are, or how they aren't supported with even a little bit of evidence, or pointing out their implicit narcissism, or pointing out that the kind of blog Spiros is running is in fact in the same genre as the pop culture books. I will also refrain from pointing out the performative contradictions involved in making bad arguments against bad arguments.
14. Practitioners of 'analytic philosophy' (a redundancy, to be sure—as if any philosophy could do without analysis!) often complain about just this feature of the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and post-structuralism. Devotees of so-called 'continental philosophy' (an ugly, ethnocentric phrase that unabashedly proclaims that *the* continent that matters for philosophy is *Europe*) likewise find the jargon of analytic philosophy every bit as burdensome and esoteric as any phenomenologist's. A welcome development in recent years has been the emergence of a group of professional philosophers who speak both languages, and who can successfully translate between them.
15. Can we be blamed for this conception of the discipline? In part, I think we can. As we work away on our philosophical projects, we very often lose the desire to explain to those outside of the discipline what we're doing. (And we sometimes even lose the ability to do this). This was a problem even in ancient Greece. It is by no means new.
16. Was philosophy taken seriously in the years before the pop culture books? No. And at that point, we were busy blaming Derrida. (One merely has to think of the letters of protest written in response to the decision of Cambridge University (in 1992) to award Derrida an honorary degree.)
17. How do we handle philosophy's place in the cultural imagination? How do we successfully insist on its relevance in a culture that often seems to have little interest in it? It seems to me that two different answers have been offered. One answer has been to try to make philosophy itself into science. This

is an old idea, and one of wide-ranging appeal—it was advocated by Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Russell, and so many more. Another answer is to write more accessibly—to add to one's philosophical labors a civic one: popularizing. The two answers can be given at once. Descartes, after all, tried to do just that. He wanted philosophy both to be scientific and to be widely available—hence the translation of the *Meditations* into a common language (French) rather than just the language of scholars (Latin). But the answers can also pull in opposite directions.

18. This claim appears in the (sometimes contested) Seventh Letter.
19. For an excellent reading of specific Platonic dialogues in this light, see James Arieti's wonderful (and, in my view, under-appreciated) *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).
20. I would like to thank Bill Irwin for comments on an early draft of this paper.

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