

Flatulence and Philosophy

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

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In the episode “Death,” Kyle’s mother leads a boycott of the boys’ favorite cartoon show, *Terrance and Phillip*, because of its continuous farting, name-calling, and general “potty humor.” While the parents are up in arms over this supposedly “moral” issue, the boys wrestle with the problem of euthanasia and Stan’s grandfather, something none of the parents will discuss with them. “Death” brings together many central issues that have made *South Park* successful and controversial—vulgarity, the misplaced moral concerns of American culture, the discussion of controversial moral topics, and the criticism that *South Park* itself is a “disgusting” show. Since “Death” that criticism has only grown—getting even bigger than Cartman’s fat ass—drawing fire for its obscene language, making fun of religion, and emphasis on freedom of speech.

Like the parents protesting *Terrance and Phillip*, critics of *South Park* make claims that are strikingly similar to those that have been leveled against Western philosophy since its beginnings. Philosophy, it’s been charged, also mocks religious beliefs, leads younger folks to question accepted authority and values, and corrupts our children and culture. These condemnations formed the basis for Socrates’ (470–399 BC) trial and execution in Athens.¹ So in this chapter we’ll explore the heretical possibility that people perceive *South Park* as dangerous precisely because it is a form of philosophy. The “danger” *South Park* poses has to do with its depiction of dialogue and free

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thought. In the end, we'll have learned something: like Socrates, *South Park* harms no one. Philosophy and *South Park* actually instruct people and provide them with the intellectual tools they need to become wise, free, and good.

Oh my God! They Killed Socrates! You Bastards!

In Plato's (427–327 BCE) *Apology*, Socrates defends himself against two charges: impiety, or false teachings about the gods, and corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates probably had as much chance of winning his case as Chef did against Johnny Cochran's "Chewbacca" defense! What is most important about Socrates' own defense, though, isn't so much *what* he says as *how* he says it. He defends himself by questioning his accuser, Meletus, leading him through a process of reasoning. For example, Socrates refutes the charge of corrupting the youth like this:

SOCRATES: You say you have discovered the one who corrupts them, namely me, and you bring me here and accuse me to the jury ... All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?

MELETUS: That is most definitely what I mean.

SOCRATES: You condemn me to a great misfortune. Tell me: does this also apply to horses do you think? That all men improve them and one individual corrupts them? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals? ... It would be a happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted our youth, while the others improved them. You have made it sufficiently obvious, Meletus, that you have never had any concern for our youth; you show your indifference clearly; that you have given no thought to the subjects about which you bring me to trial.²

Through the analogy with horse training, Socrates shows that the accusations against him are quite illogical. Just as most people would injure horses by trying to train them, and only a few good trainers improve them, so too it's likely that a few teachers improve the virtue

of the youth, while many others corrupt them. Socrates argues that he's the one teaching Athens' youth about virtue, while many others—including the idiots sitting before him—corrupt them. (As you can imagine, this did not go over well with the jury.)

While showing that the accusations are groundless, this “apology”—a word that in this case mean “defense”—demonstrates why Socrates got the death sentence of drinking hemlock. Socrates is famous for saying “I know that I don't know” and, actually, this is a wise insight. For Socrates, philosophy was the love and pursuit of wisdom, and this required questioning others to find out what they did or didn't know. Unfortunately, people often believe they're wiser than they are. By questioning them, Socrates would show them that they don't know what they believe they know: “I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise.”³ What makes Socrates wise is his recognition of his own ignorance. Many powerful people in Athens saw him as dangerous because they believed the debates he carried on would undermine their bases for power.

In the town of South Park, people in positions of power also believe they're teaching the children wisdom and virtue. However, as in Athens, most “teachers” in South Park seem to make the children worse, not better. For example, Mr. Garrison “teaches” the children creationism before switching to an unflinching Darwinism; Mrs. Broflovski always goes to crazy extremes with her “moral” outrage; Uncle Jim and Ned teach the boys to kill harmless bunnies and squirrels in “self-defense”; and the mayor panders shamelessly to voters. None of the townsfolk really *talk* to the children, except Chef (R.I.P.), who taught the art of making sweet, sweet love to a woman. Blindly following the crowd, the parents of South Park protest *Terrance and Phillip*, boycott Harbucks, and—yes—bury their heads in the sand to avoid watching *Family Guy*. And they corrupt the children far more than a television show ever could. As in “Something Wal-Mart This Way Comes,” their mindless consumption leads to an unrestrained cycle of economic and mob destruction. Like the Athenians, the adults don't know as much as they believe they know. Ultimately, if television does corrupt the children, it does so because they are left to passively absorb it by their parents, with no one to educate them about what they are seeing. Of course, there are also

cases where parents and people in powerful positions *do* try to discuss issues and ideas with the children. In these discussions, though, the adults usually sound like bumbling idiots. Socrates might even say that since this treatment systematically harms the children, there's evil at work in South Park.

Cartman Gets a Banal Probe

One of the most memorable philosophical reflections on evil in the twentieth century is Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, a study of the trial of Adolf Eichmann for his role in the deportations of millions of European Jews to concentration camps during the Jewish Holocaust. Eichmann just followed the law of the land, whatever it happened to be, and when Hitler was making the laws, Eichmann simply carried them out.⁴ In the words of Arendt, Eichmann was an unreflective person, unable to think for himself and *definitely* unable "to think from the standpoint of somebody else."⁵ What was really monstrous about Eichmann was not his vicious cruelty, but the fact that he wasn't that different from so many Germans who, under Nazism, accepted and supported laws that were obviously evil and believed that they were doing what was right. Eichmann's banality—the fact that there's nothing distinctive or exceptional about him—is *precisely* what makes him evil. He was "one of the crowd" who *didn't* walk to the beat of a different drummer and *didn't* rock the boat. He was a compliant citizen under a dictatorship, which speaks *for* its subjects and, thus, cuts off their reflective and critical thought.

Thoughtlessness leads to evil, as Arendt says, because it doesn't let us see things from others' perspectives. By blindly following orders, Eichmann didn't think about what his actions were doing to others, or even what they were doing to him. By saying he was "following the law" and "doing his duty," he ignored how his actions sent millions to their deaths and, despite his protests, made him a murderer. Thinking, according to Arendt, requires taking another's standpoint, reflecting on how you might be harming others, and asking if you can live with what you're doing.

While the adults in South Park blindly follow the latest fad or what they are told, it's the children who point out the absurdity and potential

harm that lurks in this thoughtlessness. To be more accurate, it's usually Kyle or Stan who are the reflective ones, while Cartman's mind is as empty as the Cheesy Poofs he devours daily. He's often sadistic, cruel, and evil. Like Eichmann, Cartman is probably evil because, when it comes to "authoritah," he lacks reflection and critical analysis. (And like Eichmann, he has a Nazi uniform that he's sported on occasion.) Cartman sings the Cheesy Poofs song so well because he just imitates what he hears on television. His evil is an *imitation* of the evil characters of our culture, as prepackaged as his afternoon snacks. Cartman consumes evil and imitates it as blindly and thoughtlessly as Eichmann—even when feeding Scott Tenorman his own parents (like Medea in Greek tragedy), trying to kill Kyle and Stan on a lake (like Fredo in *The Godfather*), or torturing Muslims with his farts (like Jack Bauer in 24) to find the "snuke." Most importantly, because of this thoughtlessness, Cartman is unable to see things from anyone else's viewpoint, as we see most clearly in his manipulation of his mother. Arendt says that such thoughtlessness is precisely what allows evil to emerge in modern society, and Cartman's mindless consumption is as thoughtless as it gets.

Friendship Kicks Ass! The Dialogues of Kyle and Stan

Part of what makes *South Park* philosophically interesting is the contrast between Cartman's evil stupidity and the nonconformist, reflective virtue of Kyle and Stan. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle (384–322 BC) have noted the importance of how critical reflection leads to harmony or balance and helps us to avoid extremes. After all, the "extremes" of thinking and acting often lead to mistaken beliefs and harmful behavior. Following Plato's lead, Aristotle offered the idea that *virtue* is concerned with striking a balance or hitting the mark between two extreme viewpoints, ideas, beliefs, emotions, or actions.⁶ *South Park* addresses moral issues through a discussion and criticism of established "moral" positions, both conservative and liberal, which are found to be inadequate. Kyle and Stan come to a harmonious position, in part, by negotiating and listening to these views before reaching their own conclusion through questioning and reason. Frequently, their conclusion recognizes that there's truth in

each position, but that a limited perspective is still dangerous. For example, it's true that hybrid cars are more environmentally responsible than gas-guzzling SUVs. But when an air of moral superiority clouds one's judgment, this "smug cloud" creates hostility and pollutes society in other ways.

How Stan and Kyle reach their conclusions is more significant than the conclusions themselves. Think of how they talk about whether it's wrong to kill Stan's grandpa, who wants to die. Like Socrates, they question others, seeking people who are really as wise as they believe themselves to be. Their parents, Mr. Garrison, and Jesus won't discuss or touch this issue "with a 60-foot pole." What Kyle and Stan ultimately realize—with the help of Stan's great-great-grandfather's ghost—is that they shouldn't kill his grandfather, because the action would change and harm them. As it turns out, Stan's grandfather is wrong in asking them to do this vicious action. Note that the boys reach this conclusion through living with each other, recognizing their differences, and engaging in debate. Stan and Kyle—unlike Eichmann and Cartman—learn to see things from others' perspectives, through their ongoing conversation.

In the *Apology*, Socrates makes the astounding claim that a good person cannot be harmed by the actions of others. This seems false. After all, aside from being a cartoon character, what could prevent Cartman from punching out the Dalai Lama? But what Socrates means by "good" is something different than we often realize. Goodness means being willing to think about your actions and *being able to live with what you've done*. Despite any *physical* harm—torture, imprisonment, exile, or death—that may come a person's way, no one could "hurt" a virtuous person by making them *do* something bad. Cartman, for example, couldn't make the Dalai Lama punch *him*. Socrates, for his part, refused to execute an innocent person, or to try generals for "crimes" beyond the laws of the city. And Socrates would rather die than give up the thinking and questioning that he sees as central to philosophy:

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me ... On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which

you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less.⁷

Arendt thinks likewise about goodness. Ethics, for those who resisted the Nazis, was being able to look back on their lives without shame, rather than adhering to a rigid set of questionable rules:

Their criterion [for goodness], I think, was a different one; they asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all. Hence, they also chose to die when they were forced to participate. To put it crudely, they refused to murder ... because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer—themselves. The precondition for this kind of judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking.⁸

Thinking, for Arendt, is a twofold process: it involves seeing things through another's eyes through dialogue and reflection, as well as asking what you can live with for yourself. It is, then, both an internal and an external dialogue, and only through this dialogue can critical reflection and goodness become real. Whereas Eichmann and Cartman don't critically reflect upon the consequences of actions, nor put themselves in another's shoes, thoughtful dialogue makes us attentive to others around us, lets us live with them, and helps us attend to our own goodness. Such dialogue allows us to live with ourselves—even when, like Socrates or those who resisted the Nazis, this means we must die.

Of course, in *South Park* there's no Socrates to teach philosophy or help us engage in dialogue. Surrounded by ignorance and violence, the boys are on their own. While the four are friends, *South Park* makes its compelling points in philosophy and ethics through the friendship of Kyle and Stan. For instance, in "Spookyfish," where the "evil" Cartman (who is good) arrives from a parallel universe, an evil Kyle and Stan arrive *together*. Their friendship—thinking from one another's perspective—is what helps them to be good, both for

themselves and for others. In Arendt's words, to live well is to "be plural," so that the good life is never simply one's own.⁹ This probably is why Plato wrote about important philosophical issues in dialogue form, so that it becomes clear that debate and discussion of ideas is essential to intellectual and moral growth.

For all their faults, Kyle and Stan still debate and discuss whether certain actions are wrong. On his own, Stan sometimes just goes along with the crowd, though he develops a general refusal to do harm over the show's history.¹⁰ After the boys throw toilet paper all over the art teacher's house, Kyle can't live with what he's done. Through their conversations they learn goodness and engage in the "thinking" Arendt describes. Friendship, then, helps us to examine our lives. In the episode "Prehistoric Ice Man" Larry says that "living is about sharing our ups and downs with our friends," and when we fail to do this we aren't really living at all. If thinking and goodness only arise through real dialogue with others—through critically questioning and examining *our own* views—then we need more friendships like the one Kyle and Stan share.

An Apology for South Park: Getting in Touch with Your Inner Cartman

If good friendships help us to critically examine our lives, then perhaps it's no accident that the critical voice of *South Park* has been created by two friends—Trey Parker and Matt Stone. In the *Apology* Socrates likens himself to a gadfly, an annoying pest that goes around "stinging" people with his challenging questions and critical reflections to keep them intellectually awake and on their toes. *South Park*, too, serves as a gadfly, trying to wake American culture from its thoughtlessness and ignorance. The show generates discussion and debate and leads many people to discuss ethical issues that would otherwise be passed over in silence. For a show that supposedly corrupts, it has a more intense focus on religion, ethics, and democracy than its critics would like to admit. But, of course, we could still ask if the *way* that *South Park* presents these issues is really necessary. For example, is it philosophically wise and necessary to use the word "shit" 163 times in one show? Or have so much, farting, vomiting, and violence? What philosophical goal can such vulgarity serve?

The vulgarity and crudeness of *South Park* is often defended on the grounds of free speech. However, a different issue is also in play. *South Park* often says what is not socially or morally acceptable to say; that is, in terms established by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), what must be *repressed*. According to Freud, our thoughts and actions are shaped by “drives,” including emotions, desires, and hostile or consumptive energy. (Freud would have a field day with Cartman’s twisted little mind!) These drives are part of our embodied being, yet, since they are dangerous and often violent, we try to control and even silence them. This control is a form of repression, but it can often have unintended consequences. Repression of a drive can lead to other sorts of unconscious, violent behavior, and suppressed wishes like these form the content of dreams, our “unconscious” life.¹¹ Repression, or internal censorship, redirects but doesn’t diminish our aggression. In spite of our intentions, this unconscious aggression often shapes who we are, how we think, and what we do.

What Freud discovered with psychoanalysis was that talking about our dreams may serve as a way to address this repression and its associated violence. When we talk these ideas and feelings out, the repression is broken and, through the realization, we can come to terms with the desire and shape it through thinking. Representing desires lets them be expressed, and this helps us to integrate them into the structure of our lives.¹² By bringing to light what had been unconscious, dream interpretation lets us think through these aspects of ourselves.

Freud also thought that jokes work like dreams. When one person tells a joke, its spontaneous and unexpected word-form breaks through another person’s repression. Laughter is a “release of energy” that had been blocked; this is why many jokes have a vulgar or obscene dimension. As Freud points out, jokes only really work when the person telling them doesn’t laugh, so that the surprise can make others laugh.¹³ There is pleasure in laughing at the joke, and in telling it, as well as pleasure in freeing others from their repression.

Through its vulgarity, *South Park* verbalizes the drives and desires that we often repress; and, it allows us to laugh so as to reveal these inhibitions. This is what makes the show’s crudeness essential. Showing us “Token” or the conjoined fetus nurse, or saying *shit* over and over brings out the aggression and desire that we can’t express on our own. And, for things that really *shouldn’t* be said, Kenny says

them in a muffled way, and the other boys comment. By verbalizing these drives, the show lets us begin to think them through. It's then possible to analyze them and, by doing this, distance ourselves from them. For instance, many episodes address how outsiders are berated and subjected to racist or xenophobic slander. By working through these incidents, the show demonstrates that such slander is used among friends as well. Verbal sparring, when so understood, needn't lead to violence or exclusion. It doesn't justify such speech, but it does create a space in which the hostility can be interpreted and analyzed.

Likewise, there's a reason for all of the farting on *Terrance and Phillip*. At least two interpretations of this show-within-the-show are possible. First, there is the issue of why the boys love such a stupid show so much. It's not that they wish they could fart all the time. Rather, when they fart, Terrance and Phillip do what's forbidden: they transgress parents' social prohibitions. This appeals to the boys because they wish they could be free from parental control and regulation too.

Second, regular viewers (some of them my students) have noted that *Terrance and Phillip* is self-referential, a way for *South Park* to comment on itself. The opening of *South Park* tells us that, like *Terrance and Phillip*, the show has no redeeming value and should be watched by no one. The stupidity and vulgarity of the cartoon is better understood, however, if we look beyond *South Park*. Is *Terrance and Phillip* really more vapid, crude, and pointless than *Jerry Springer* or *Wife Swap*? Is it more mindless than *Fox News*, *The 700 Club*, or *Law and Order*? When we see Kyle, Cartman, Kenny, and Stan watching *Terrance and Phillip*, this is a reflection of the fact that television fulfills our wish for mindlessness. What offends the parents in *South Park*—and the critics of *South Park*—is not that the show is vulgar and pointless, but that it highlights the imbecility of television in general.

Both interpretations show that censorship can be questioned at multiple levels. On the one hand, censorship looks at vulgarity, choosing what can and can't afford to be seen based on social norms. *South Park* questions this sort of censorship, saying what can't be said and challenging social forms of repression. But, if part of *South Park*'s message is the need for thinking, then it also questions how television, by fulfilling our wish for mindlessness, represses active thinking. Of course, brainlessness can't simply be blamed on parents or television corporations or two doofusses from Colorado who can't draw

straight. Like the mindless Athenians who were to blame for their own ignorance, or Eichmann's responsibility when he thought he was just obeying the law, if we really hold a mirror up to ourselves, we'll find that our own mindlessness is the heart of Wal-Mart. Like Socrates, *South Park*—and Kyle and Stan specifically—present us with a way to reflect on what *we think* we really know, and through reflection move beyond our mindlessness.

The Talking Cure for Our Culture

By ceaselessly testing the limits of our tolerance, *South Park* asks us to examine the things we think we know, why certain words and actions are prohibited, what we desire, and what we're teaching our children. It provocatively asks us to think about what's truly harmful, and what issues we really should be outraged about. Breaking the silence of our culture's repressions could be the starting point for a Socratic dialogue that helps us to think, analyze our desires and aggression, and become better people. If we take the opportunity to discuss the show, why it's funny, and what it tells us about our culture and our own desires, then *South Park* need not be seen as mindless, vulgar, or corrupting, but rather as a path to thinking that helps us to live with one another, and with ourselves.¹⁴

Notes

1. Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1981). Also see Xenophon, *Recollections of Socrates, and Socrates' Defense Before the Jury*, trans. Anna Benjamin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
2. Plato, *Apology*, 30.
3. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
4. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 135–150.
5. Plato, *Apology*, 49.
6. See Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. David Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999).

7. Plato, *Apology*, 41.
8. Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2003), 40–41.
9. Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 6–7.
10. I owe this insight to Kyle Giroux.
11. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 156–166.
12. For more on this issue, see Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1990).
13. Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Dover, 1993), 261–273.
14. My thanks to Kyle Giroux for his work as a "South Park consultant" and his suggestions for ways to update this version. Additional thanks to Keith Wilde and Nicole Merola for their comments and suggestions on this chapter, and to numerous students from Endicott College for their discussions of an earlier version of it. Errors remain my own.