

Flatulence and Philosophy

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

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Summary

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

The "Danger" of *South Park*

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

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

Oh My God! They Killed Socrates! You Bastards!

In Plato’s (427–327 BCE) *Apology*, Socrates defends himself against two charges: (1) impiety (false teachings about the gods, possibly that they don’t exist) and (2) corrupting the youth of Athens. In reality, Socrates probably had as much chance of winning his case as Chef did against Johnny Cochran’s “Chewbacca” defense! What is most important about Socrates’ defense, however, is not so much what he says as *how* he says it. He defends himself by questioning his accuser, Meletus, leading him through a process of **reasoning**. For example, Socrates refutes the charge of corrupting the youth as follows:

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

MELETUS: That is most definitely what I mean.

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

¹ Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981). Hereafter noted as (*Apology*, p. “x”) in the text. Also see Xenophon, *Recollections of Socrates, and Socrates’ Defense Before the Jury*, trans. by Anna Benjamin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

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

While showing that the accusations are groundless, this “apology” – a word that also can mean *defense* – demonstrates why Socrates got a death sentence of hemlock. Socrates is famous for saying “I know that I don’t know” and, actually, this is a wise insight. For Socrates, philosophy was the love and pursuit of wisdom, and this required questioning others to find out what they do or don’t know. Unfortunately, people often believe they are wiser than they are. By questioning them, Socrates would show them that they don’t know what they believe they know: “I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise” (*Apology*, pp. 28–9). What makes Socrates wise is his recognition of his own ignorance, through continuous questioning of himself and others. Many powerful people in Athens saw him as dangerous because his questioning and debate would undermine their bases for power.

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

Cartman Gets a Banal Probe

One of the most significant 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.² 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” (Arendt, p. 49). What was really monstrous about Eichmann was not his vicious cruelty, but rather the way that he was not that different from so many Germans who, under Hitler, accepted and supported laws that were obviously evil and believed that they were doing what was right. Eichmann’s banality – the fact that there is 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 embodied complicit citizenship 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 himself. 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 are doing.

While the adults in *South Park* blindly follow the latest fad, or what they are told, it is the children who bring out the absurdity and potential harm that lurks in such 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 Cheesypoofs he devours daily. He is often sadistic, cruel, and evil. Like Eichmann, Cartman is probably evil because, when it comes to “authorita,” he lacks reflection and critical analysis. (And like Eichmann, he has a Nazi uniform that he has sported on occasion.) Cartman sings the Cheesypoofs song so well because all he can do is imitate 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. Most importantly, because of this thoughtlessness, Cartman is unable to see things from anyone else’s viewpoint (as illustrated most clearly in his manipulation of his mother). As Arendt says, 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 non-conformist, reflective virtue of Kyle and Stan. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) have noted the importance of

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 135–50. Hereafter cited as (Arendt, p. “x”) in the text.

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. In fact, following Plato’s lead, Aristotle put forward the idea that *virtue* is concerned with striking a balance or hitting the mark between two extreme viewpoints, ideas, beliefs, emotions, or actions.³ *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 virtuous 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 is some truth to each position, but that its 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 discuss whether it’s wrong to kill Stan’s grandpa, who wants to die. They, like Socrates, question those around them, seeking to know if the people are as wise as they believe. 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 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 reflectively thinking about one’s actions and *being able to live with what one has done*. Despite any *physical* harm – torture, imprisonment, exile, or death – that may come a person’s way, no one can “hurt” a virtuous person by making him/her *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, significantly, 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

3 See Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by David Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999).

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. (*Apology*, p. 41)

Arendt has a similar **conception** of goodness. Ethics, for those (unlike Eichmann) who resisted the Nazis, was being able to look back on one's life without shame, rather than adhering to a set of rules. Her description deserves quoting:

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.⁴

Thinking, for Arendt, is a twofold process: it involves seeing things through another's eyes, in dialogue and reflection, as well as determining whether you can live with your own actions. It is, then, both an internal and an external dialogue, and it is only through this dialogue that critical reflection and goodness become possible. Whereas Eichmann and Cartman do not 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 is 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 a compelling point about philosophy and ethics through the particulars of the friendship of Kyle and Stan. For instance, in "Spooky Fish," 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.⁵ This probably is why Plato wrote about important philosophical issues in a dialogue format, so that it becomes clear that debate and discussion of ideas are essential to any intellectual and moral growth.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2003), pp. 40–1.

⁵ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, pp. 96–7.

For all their faults, Kyle and Stan still debate and discuss whether certain actions are wrong. On his own, Stan will sometimes just go along with the crowd (an important exception is his refusal to kill). 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 friendships help us to critically examine the lives that we lead, 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 so as 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 into discussions of ethical issues that would otherwise be passed over in silence. For a show that supposedly corrupts, it has far more of a 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 to have so much farting, vomiting, and violence? What philosophical goal can such vulgarity serve?

The vulgarity and crudeness of *South Park* are 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 – what, in Freudian terms, must be repressed. According to Freud, our thoughts and actions are shaped by what he calls “drives,” examples of which include emotions, desires, and energy that can be aggressive, hostile, and consumptive. (Freud would have a field day with Cartman’s twisted little mind, on this score.) These drives are part of our embodied being, yet, since they are dangerous and often violent, we try to control or 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 such suppressed wishes form the content of dreams – our “unconscious” life.⁶ Repression, as a form of internal censorship, redirects but does not diminish our aggression. In spite of our intentions, this unconscious aggression often shapes who we are, how we think, and what we do.

⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), pp. 156–66.

What Freud discovered with psychoanalysis was that talking out and interpreting 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.⁷ By bringing to light what had been unconscious, dream-interpretation lets us think through these aspects of ourselves.

Freud thought that jokes work much 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 has been blocked, because we have tried to repress the wish or drive; this is why many jokes have a vulgar or obscene dimension. As Freud points out, the one who supplies it has to deny it – jokes only really work when the person telling them doesn't laugh, so that the surprise can make others laugh.⁸ 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. By showing us "Token" or the conjoined fetus nurse, or saying *shit* over and over, it brings out the aggression and desire that we feel we cannot express. And, for things that really *shouldn't* be said, Kenny says them in a muffled way, and the other boys comment on it. By verbalizing these drives, the show lets us begin to think these through – it makes it possible to analyze them, and thereby distance ourselves from them. For instance, many episodes address how outsiders are berated and subjected to racist or xenophobic slander. However, by working through these statements, the show argues that in many cases, such slander is used among friends as well – and that such verbal sparring, when so understood, need not 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, one can analyze all of the farting on *Terrance and Philip*. 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 Philip do what is forbidden: they transgress the parents' social prohibition. This appeals to the boys, because they wish they too could be free from parental control and regulation.

Second, regular viewers (mostly my students) have noted that *Terrance and Philip* is self-referential, a way for *South Park* to comment on itself. The opening of *South Park* tells us that, like *Terrance and Philip*, 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 Philip* really more vapid, crude, and pointless than *Jerry Springer* or *Wife Swap*? Is it more mindless

⁷ 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).

⁸ Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by A. A. Brill (New York: Dover, 1993), pp. 261–73.

than *Fox News*, *The 700 Club*, or *Law and Order*? The answer is no. When we see Kyle, Cartman, Kenny, and Stan watching *The Terrance and Philip Show*, it shows us 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 mindlessness of television in general.

What both of these interpretations show is that there are multiple levels of censorship that need to be questioned. On the one hand, there is the censorship that simply looks at vulgarity, and decides what can and cannot be seen, based upon social norms. *South Park* clearly questions this sort of censorship, saying so often what cannot 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, supposedly represses thinking. Of course, such mindlessness can't simply be blamed on one's 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, the mindlessness that prevents thinking is ultimately our own doing. Like Socrates, perhaps *South Park* – and Kyle and Stan more specifically – presents us with a way to think about 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 culture's 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 are teaching our children. Through its provocation, it asks us to think about what is 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 good. If we take the opportunity to discuss the show, why it is funny, and what it tells us about our culture and our own desires, then the show need not be mindless, vulgar, or corrupting, but rather a path to thinking that helps us to live with one another, and with ourselves.