

My Favorite Philosopher Is... Problematic

JULY 20, 2017 / THE MINDLESS PHILOSOPHER

THERE ARE A FEW things these days that truly worry me: Crepey skin... Opioid-induced constipation...

Am I entitled to financial compensation if my loved one was exposed to mesothelioma-causing asbestos?

There is one thing I thought I never had to worry about: philosophers.

I was wrong.

Recent sex scandals involving the (formerly) respected philosophers Colin McGinn and John Searle, and the trial of Rutgers University philosophy professor, Anna Stubblefield, who was convicted of the sexual assault of a 29 year old man with severe cerebral palsy, have made me think twice about the profession I'd once thought as scandal free.

Stubblefield's conviction was overturned, by the way.

Nonetheless, it's all kind of a black eye to the profession.

You see, pretty much nobody likes philosophers.

Sure, our moms and pops love us plenty, but when it comes to what society thinks of lovers of wisdom, the love is much to be desired.

"I have studied many philosophers and many cats. The wisdom of cats is far superior"

– Hippolyte Taine (1828 – 1893)

Philosophers got a shout out during the Republican Presidential Debates last year, but not for the reason that anyone would want to brag about.

Former Republican presidential candidate, Florida Representative Marco Rubio, declared that we need more welders and less philosophers.



WHO'S TO SAY THIS GUYS DOESN'T READ SCHOPENHAUER
IN HIS SPARE TIME/

Rubio's fellow Republican candidate, Ted Cruz, declared that the Federal Reserve was being run by philosopher-kings. That kinda sounds like a good thing, but Cruz didn't mean it that way.

"There is, however, nothing wanting to the idleness of a philosopher but a better name, and that meditation, conversation, and reading should be called "work".

– Jean de La Bruyere (1645 – 1696)

I'm not saying that welders aren't a necessity. Lord knows that when I think about the folks who built my apartment, I'm glad that some of them picked up welding instead of Socrates.

But I'm also saying that philosophers can be useful, too.

Speaking of useful...

I thought if I went back to read the old philosophers, I'd find guys (and a few gals) who are not only brilliant, but also free of defect.

Uh...



Sure, there's some great classic philosophy, but going back to read the old philosophers just proves that those old white guys really were a bunch of old. white. guys.

They call it the Enlightenment but really, some of them folks weren't very enlightened.

All Most Some of history's greatest philosophers are sexist (dare we say even hovering near misogyny) and slightly more than casually racist.

Rousseau abandoned his kids.

Hegel fathered an illegitimate son with his landlord and was kind of a dick to the kid.

Descartes tortured animals.

Heidegger was a Nazi.



NOT TALKING ABOUT METAPHORICAL NAZI, LIKE
HEIDEGGER WAS GRAMMAR NAZI, BUT FULL-ON, HITLER
SALUTING NAZI

Even my favorite philosopher, the 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, wrote things that could only be described these days as... problematic.

In 1742, Hume wrote:

"I am apt to suspect that the Negroes, and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was any civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation."

Hume also said that the Jews of Europe were *"noted for fraud"*.

But hey, at least Hume was against slavery!



WHO KNEW HUME AND HEIDEGGER WOULD HAVE SO MUCH IN COMMON?

Ok, we can say that we shouldn't judge others by our modern standards. And sometimes we shouldn't. But here's the thing: we can judge. We should judge.

You know, something about moral relativism.

Actually, there were plenty of people who objected to racism and sexism even back then.

I got so bummed out about philosophers that ~~like a damned idiot~~ I thought that turning to fictional philosophers would help.

Nope.

First off, there's a real lack of philosophers in movies.



LOOKING FOR A SOMEWHAT-DECENT PORTRAYAL OF A PHILOSOPHER IN A MOVIE OF A TV SHOW

As opposed to *philosophy* or movies that are *philosophical* – there's plenty of that.

A lot of it bad.

...Although Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* is a pretty good philosophical movie.

In the real world, we have highly entertaining philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, but in film (in movies that aren't strictly biographical – there's been movies about Socrates, Hypatia of Alexandria, Confucius, Descartes, Wittgenstein, and Hannah Arendt, among others or adapted from philosophical works, like Ayn Rand's 1949 film adaptation of her novel, *The Fountainhead*), philosophers are depicted as dull, ineffectual, arrogant, and morally bankrupt.



AYN RAND DIDN'T INVENT PHILOSOPHICAL MORAL BANKRUPTCY. SHE JUST GOT THE MOST POPULAR AT IT

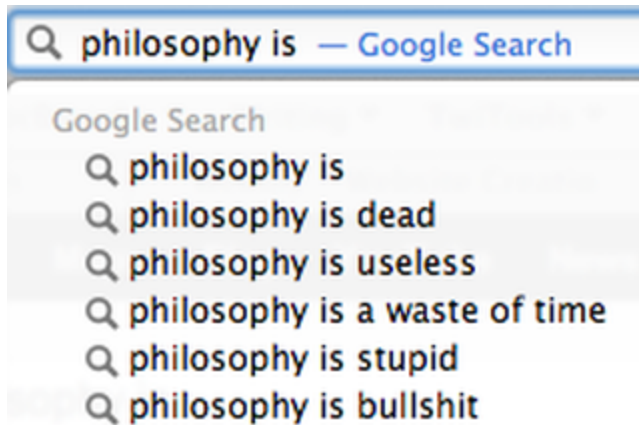
Granted, movie philosophers are smart guys (and it is almost always a guy) but personally, especially morally, the movie philosopher is always royally screwed up.

Wait a minute. That describes a few real philosophers.

Movie philosophers are all thought and no action. All preparation and no H. They're excellent at navel gazing and pontificating; high on the stink of their capacity for rational thought.

Popular depictions of philosophers (in film) tend to reflect the idea that intellectuals are not to be trusted.

Or at the very least they're not to be taken seriously.



Cinematic philosophers add nothing of value to society other than to increase the amount of bullshit and useless opinions.

You're nodding your head, aren't you?



In movies, the goal always is to prove how stupid and wrong philosophy and philosophers are.

And philosophers don't believe in **GOD**.

Movie philosophers are often philosophical but not philosophers. Like Yoda.

Yoda is a badass because he's *not* a philosopher.

I decided to watch a few movies with philosophers in them to get a look-see at philosophers in film.

... and to affirm my confirmation bias.

“Philosophers say a great deal about what is absolutely necessary for science, and it is always so far as one can see, rather naïve, and probably wrong.

– Richard Feynman (1918 -1988)

In Mel Brooks’ *History of the World, Part 1*, when a “stand-up philosopher” (played by Brooks) gives his occupation, his occupation is corrected to “bullshit artist”.



In *The Life of David Gale*, Kevin Spacey plays a philosophy professor put to death for murder.

By the way, he’s not guilty of the crime for which he is executed, mind you. He set himself up to be executed for a crime he didn’t commit to prove that the death penalty is wrong.

That’s a pretty underhanded thing to do.

Because movie philosophers do underhanded things.

Oops. Should I have said **SPOILER ALERT**?

In Woody Allen’s *Irrational Man* Joaquin Phoenix plays a philosophy professor (long story short) who attempts to murder a student he was flirted with.

Woody Allen is the king of movies with philosophical themes.

He’s also the king of movies about older men having semi-inappropriate relationships with disturbingly much younger women.

Because philosophers have inappropriate relationships with much younger women, especially if they’re students.



PHILOSOPHY PROFESSORS AND STING. NOT GONNA EXPLAIN THE REFERENCE

Somehow its always the philosopher who wants to ball his students...

Speaking of balling students...

In the film *Leaves of Grass* written and directed by Tim Blake Nelson, Edward Norton stars as a Brown University philosophy professor, Bill Kincaid. Kincaid goes back to his hometown in Oklahoma to trade places with his hillbilly marijuana-dealing identical twin brother, Brady (also played by Edward Norton), who is mixed up with the local drug kingpin. In no surprise to the audience, Brady is the smarter twin and is also philosophical – but not like an overeducated intellectual Ivy League college philosophy professor kind of way.



COME ON, WOULD YOU IF EDWARD NORTON WAS YOUR PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR?

The Alfred Hitchcock film *Rope* (1948) is about a pair Nietzsche fans that demonstrate what happens when you get Nietzsche all wrong and that nihilism isn't for everybody... or anybody.

...and then there's my favorite, *God's Not Dead*, the Christian cinema classic from 2014 starring Kevin Sorbo as an atheist philosophy professor. Yes, **THAT** atheist philosophy professor – the one, who, on the first day of class, challenges students to prove that God exists.

Or rather, confirm that God doesn't exist.

Philosophy professors, like Sorbo's Professor Jeffery Radisson, delight in breaking the faith of his Christian students.



IT'S AN ESTABLISHED FACT IN PHILOSOPHY CIRCLES THAT SCREAMING ATHEISM IN A STUDENT'S FACE WILL SCREAM THE GOD RIGHT OUT OF THEM

Because he believes that philosophers know everything.

So far as I know, only Hegel thought that. About himself.

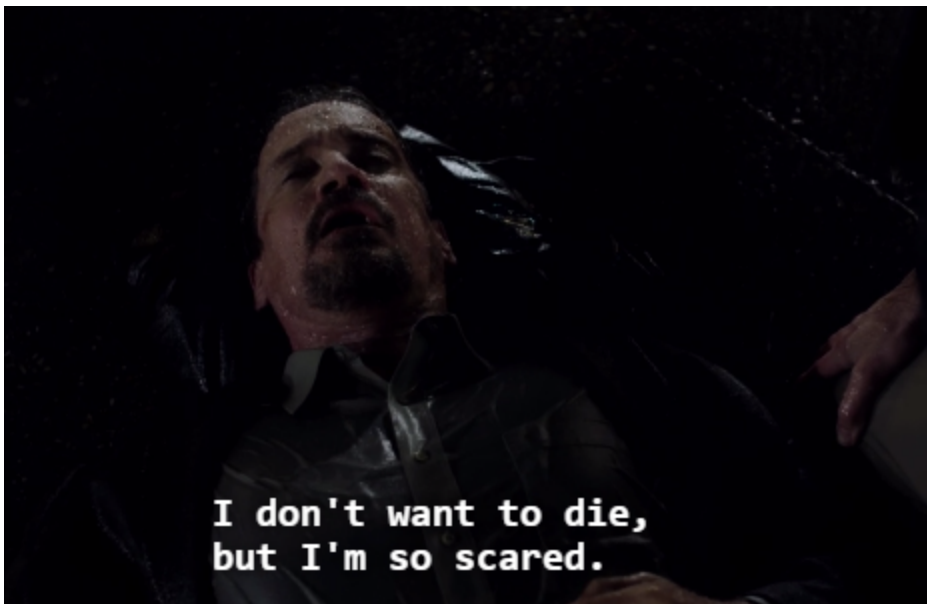
God's Not Dead relies heavily on the popular (mis)conception that all philosophers are godless, God-hating atheists. Sorbo's philosophy professor is high on his intellectualism. Proving God does not exist is an exercise in confirming his intellectual arrogance.

Obviously the folks who made *God's Not Dead* have never heard of Alvin Plantinga.

Or Richard Swinburne.

Or Peter van Inwagen.

Of course the atheist philosophy professor dies in the end.



RADISSON IS AFRAID TO DIE BECAUSE HE KNOWS ALL
PHILOSOPHERS GO TO HELL

By the way, in my experience, never once in a philosophy class that wasn't specifically a philosophy of religion class did any professor even mention arguments for or against the existence of God.

All of these depictions of philosophers are around because we think philosophers, not just the old white sexists and racists of the past, and not just the present-day philosophers accused of sexual impropriety, are problematic.

Philosophy is problematic.

That is something worth worrying about.

Not crepey skin-level worry, but worrying nonetheless.



SERIOUSLY, HOW CAN YOU LOOK AT THIS AND NOT BE WORRIED?

**** I'd like to add here that there is at least one awesomely excellent portrayal of a philosopher in popular culture, NYU philosophy degree-havin', tai chi mastering, rip a man's throat out with his bare hands-doin' , bouncer (whoops) cooler, James Dalton, portrayed by the late (always great) Patrick Swayze in Road House.**

Road House is a supremely bad movie, but in its awfulness is cinematic gold.

And Dalton's great piece of philosophical mantra, *"Be Nice, Until It's Time To Not Be Nice"*.

**** I encourage anyone to watch all the films mentioned in this post. If not to see how philosophers are depicted in cinema, some of the movies actually are entertaining to watch.**

For details on the Anna Stubblefield case:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/opinion/who-is-the-victim-in-the-anna-stubblefield-case.html>

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philosophers

ANNA STUBBLEFIELD , COLIN MCGINN , DAVID
HUME , EDWARD NORTON , GOD'S NOT DEAD
HISTORY OF THE WORLD PART 1 , IRRATIONAL
MAN , JAMES DALTON , JOHN SEARLE , KEVIN
SORBO , LEAVES OF GRASS , MARCO RUBIO
PHILOSOPHERS IN FILM , ROAD HOUSE , ROPE
TED CRUZ , THE LIFE OF DAVID GALE
WOODY ALLEN

BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM.