

Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book About Nothing

Edited By William Irwin

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The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh of Homer

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Seinfeld and Philosophy

In his recent book, *Seinfeld and Philosophy*, Dr. William Irwin cleverly pieces together a collection of articles showing the similarities between the sitcom *Seinfeld* and philosophy. This impressive volume sets forth a new way of looking at this all around funny show; it is not only amusing but also informative. It is written in such a way that both the advanced philosopher as well as the serious *Seinfeld* fanatic can gain some insight into the complexity that is *Seinfeld*.

When thinking about the characters of this show, we typically think about their actions to describe them. Jerry is always thought of as the neat-freak comic that changes girlfriends like most people change socks. George is the stocky bald man that always sees himself as a loser and gets stuck in bad situations continually. Elaine is a typical "mans' woman" as Kramer would say. She fits in with the boys much better than she ever would with other women, and trails in second to Jerry with the amount of short-term love interests she has acquired over the life of the show. And of course we have Kramer, who could forget him! Kramer will forever be known as Jerry's next door neighbor that runs through his door the same way every time, that uses his apartment as if it were his own, but above all as the funny guy with a line for everything, who is always in the middle of a get rich quick scheme.

A part of *Seinfeld and Philosophy* is devoted to reconsidering the traditional interpretations of the main characters of the show. The authors of these individual articles have paired up each character with a philosopher and showed how the philosopher's thought fits in with the character's life. At first glance the connection may not seem to be there, but after reading on, you see it was right in front of you all along.

Who better to compare the most influential character of *Seinfeld* to then the most influential philosopher, Socrates. One of the most memorable words of Socrates, "...the unexamined life isn't worth living", can be seen as an incredible insight into Jerry's world. Jerry, like Socrates, sees life as something that should be analyzed to the fullest that it could be. They both teach us not to let life slip us by and really live it. However, it is plain to see that Jerry, and Socrates have different analogies on what life encompasses, and how they choose to live it. Jerry chooses to analyze the world around him by nit-picking his surroundings. Whether it is his family, friends, or many girlfriends, he always chooses to take the pessimistic view of things. Socrates on the other hand chooses to find the good in things, and help other people find it to. Socrates was in actuality an optimistic form of Jerry, long before being Jerry was fashionable. The pair both have the ability to provoke their friends into looking at things from other points of views than they normally would. They are blessed with the gift of gab, but choose to use it in very different ways. At the end of Socrates life, and the end of the series for Jerry, they both were sentenced and condemned; Socrates to death, and Jerry to prison. Even at his deathbed we can see how admirably Socrates lived his life, however, at the end of the series we know Jerry lived his life any way but admirable.

Jerry's friends each have a philosophical connection as well. George is analyzed with an Aristotelian view on his failed quest for happiness. He is clearly the loser on this show, and we tend to wonder why he is thought of in that way. George appears to be missing Aristotle's intellectual virtue, which could be the answer. Any *Seinfeld* fan would remember the episode in which George decided to do the opposite of everything his instincts normally tell him to do. In doing this he finds things starting to look up for him,

things start working out. However, even this isn't a result of George suddenly finding reason in his life, it is more of a temporary spout of good luck.

The author then questions whether Elaine is a feminist and we later realize that indeed she is not. However, she is certainly affected with the feminist view of a powerful woman. She is clearly the most independent of the group, never relying on a man for financial or emotional support.

Then we have the funny man of the show, Kramer. Kramer is portrayed here as being stuck in Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of life. He seeks only to gratify his immediate urges, and according to Kierkegaard this can only lead to despair. This philosopher describes the stage as someone that can never stand to be bored, and that can jump full fledged into any endeavor, as well as jump right out of it just as fast. If this doesn't sound like Kramer I don't know what does.

The remaining sections of the book are devoted to the philosophy that the show itself represents. One of the main philosophical points found here is the idea that you could get something from nothing. As we all know Seinfeld itself is supposed to be a show about nothing, but the question remains, is nothing actually something? The philosopher Parmenides said since nothing does not exist, nothing significant could be said about it.

Later, Socrates along with his disciple Plato took his thoughts seriously, and felt that there is an element of nothingness in everything around us and this nothingness is a strong force. The Buddha in India and Lao Tzu in China also felt there was something to say about nothing. According to them happiness and peace were earthly rewards for properly understanding nothing. So perhaps there is something within nothing as the creators of Seinfeld suggests. In one of the later episodes of Seinfeld we see Jerry and George proposing a show about nothing to the executives of NBC. Of course they find that this idea is ridiculous and believe that it will never work. That's simply another irony found in the show having lasted nine seasons as a show about nothing

One of the shows main concerns is ethics, as silly as that sounds. But think about it, how many times have we seen these characters discuss what is right to do in any given situation that comes up? It's more often than you'd think. Some of the questions of ethics they bring up we may even have asked ourselves at one point or another. For example, why do we bring cake and wine to someone's house when invited over to dinner? Or why is the proper response to hearing someone sneeze always God bless you? I mean really how is being blessed by God a reward for performing a bodily function? These are examples of questions asked by characters in this show from any given episode. However their ethical ideals are much different than most, if not all-major philosophers. Then again I'm sure most of ours are also.

Typically, people call Seinfeld "the show about nothing". Many even propose it's a show that that means nothing; however, it's proven quite well by this book that Seinfeld demonstrates something completely the opposite of that. Seinfeld isn't about nothing at all, it's about everything!

The Simpsons and Philosophy

Many of us have grown up watching the hit television cartoon "The Simpsons". We all spend a total of what I sure was hours discussing the previous nights episode with friends at school the next day. What most of us weren't aware of was the massive amount of philosophical insight embodied within the show we have grown to love.

In their book, *The Simpson's and Philosophy*, William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble show us what lurks beneath the surface of this tremendous cartoon. At first he looks at the characters and analyses them philosophically to see what they have to offer us.

Of course the most popular character would come first, Homer Simpson. Here we analyze the moral aspect of Homer Simpson, or better put the lack of. Through the life of the show we see Homer gorge himself with any and all food and drink that come his way. We see Homer here as also the habitual liar (and we wonder

where Bart gets it from). He continually forgets his youngest daughter Maggie exists, and usually disagrees with Marge. Through all these faults we see he may not be virtuous but he is defiantly not malicious. When push comes to shove we see value in him yet. His wife Marge has qualities herself worth mentioning. Unlike her neighbor Flanders that does the religious thing whether it's right or wrong, Marge is religious yet lets her reason be here guide. Though she can be seen as the typical housewife, it is her ability of reason, which helps her stand up for herself from time to time.

Then we have the kids to deal with, Bart being the most popular. We all can remember the crazy things he's done like burning down the family Christmas tree, and cutting off the head of Jebediah Springfield. He's a good example of the phrase, "It's good to be bad". The author shows the connection between Bart and Nietzsche, seeing as Nietzsche is seen as philosophy's bad boy while Bart is Springfield's bad boy. Lisa is another story; here we see what typically happens to the smart kid in town. She is a great example of a person with a strong intellect that we love to hate. The respect people give her for her intelligence goes hand in hand with resentment. She's a strong woman just as her mother is. Then we have the forgotten daughter Maggie. Poor Maggie gets kept out of mind continuously. In her we see that sometimes "silence is golden".

After analyzing the main characters, secondary characters are mentioned along with their role in the Springfield society. Such characters as Flanders, Moe, Apu, and Principal Skinner have affected our "water cooler talk" as well. From here we get a glimpse of the moral realm of the Simpson's, various themes of the show, and a complete list of every episode and its airdate.

Such philosophers are mentioned as Derrida, Aristotle, Ayn Rand, Confucius, Kant, and more. This book is a fun and interesting way to pick up some main points of philosophy, while doing it in a way that seems fun to you. After all, for a show that took the air in 1989 and is still airing new episodes every week, they must have captured something good with it.