



Book Review

Frog and Toad Go to High School

A Review of Tom Wartenberg's *A Sneetch is a Sneetch and Other Philosophical Discoveries*

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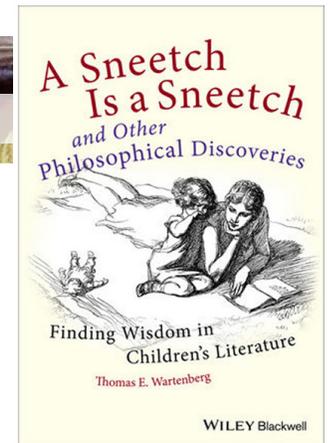
I don't have a background in P4C or much familiarity with children's literature beyond the books I read years ago with my own children. But I was smitten by the charming stories deftly retold in *A Sneetch Is a Sneetch*, and it didn't take long to convince me that a story about cookies qualifies as a philosophical text. Both playful and serious, like the stories themselves, Tom's discussion deepens each story's meaning while inviting the adult reader to join him in philosophical inquiry. My own engagement with *Sneetch* was guided by neither the critic's discernment nor the adult's expectation of encountering philosophy for the first time. I read instead from the perspective of a veteran high school teacher. And even though I know I am not Tom's intended audience, it's the teacher's response to his book that I'd like to share.

As a high school philosophy teacher, I've never accepted the view that professional philosophers have a monopoly on philosophy. I have drawn widely from film and short fiction that explore philosophical questions, vividly create thought experiments, or dramatize abstract problems. Examples of short fiction include George Saunders's "Escape from Spiderhead," Milan Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game," Sartre's "The Wall," and "No Exit," and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. I've also shown films ranging from Wim Wenders's "Wings of Desire" and Bergmann's "Winter Light" to Woody Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors" and the Nolan brothers' "Memento." Much of this material is sophisticated and intellectually challenging. Some of it also is unsettling or disturbing. My students generally rise to the challenge and welcome opportunities to engage "serious" literature and film.

As I read Tom's book last summer, I detected a snug fit between some of the stories and my own curriculum. For example, one story fit well with the topic of free will, another with epistemology. I sensed that these stories could effectively motivate philosophical questions and that Tom's perceptive commentary could help me stimulate and guide classroom discussion. But would my students be receptive to children's stories? Or would they be disdainful of material that might appear to make light of the discipline or to question their own intellectual maturity? My concerns proved groundless. Far from being dismissive, students warmly welcomed Shrek and Morris as old friends. The class eagerly sat on the floor and students took turns as storyteller. We read *Morris the Moose* together on the second day of class. Following Tom's cue, we traced Morris's peculiar reasoning in judging that a self-professed cow suffered from a case of mistaken iden-

tity and was actually a moose. The question of criteria for defining "moose" led to discussion of necessary and sufficient conditions. Students discovered independently the error in Morris's reasoning. Having four legs and a tail may be necessary conditions for an animal being a moose, but the same properties are not sufficient conditions since animals other than moose also have four legs—cows, for example. So, an ostensibly simple story pointed students toward an important analytical distinction. Then I asked student to apply the distinction to criteria for a definition of personhood. They debated whether being a human is a necessary condition for being a person. What about a great ape? Why not an intelligent alien? Well, maybe not necessary but sufficient, others suggested. Then counter-examples were aired: What about a comatose human or one with severe Alzheimer's? Students reconsidered the adequacy of their criteria and grew skeptical that being human is necessary or sufficient for being a person. It was a good day and Morris played an important role in its success. In my introduction to philosophical reasoning, I also draw the distinction between causal possibility and logical possibility. Perhaps Tom can point teachers to available children's fiction on, say, time travel to help bring this second important distinction to life.

Philosophy of language typically sits on the periphery of the high school philosophy curriculum. Tom's book can help bring it closer to the core of our teaching. For example, he shows how the story "Shrek!" is instructive in investigating the nature and justification of strong aesthetic and ethical preferences. The very things that repel and disgust us attract and delight Shrek. In analyzing the concept of "disgust," Tom draws the important distinction between the evaluative and descriptive dimensions of a sentence such as "The dead skunk smells disgusting." The expression of disapproval or aversion is subjective and the scent arguably an objective property of the dead skunk. We generally assume that descriptive and evaluative properties are inseparable. Who could imagine, Tom asks, delighting in the fragrance of dead skunk? But Shrek is a valuable thought experiment that disturbs this assumption by showing how evaluative and descriptive properties can pull apart. Students use words like "gross" or "creepy" to insist that something is wrong or ugly, but perhaps there is no inherent connection between our feelings of disgust and actual features of the world. Tom draws the important conclusion that our inability to share



Shrek's enjoyment is perhaps "due to our own parochialism, our mistake of taking our own experience of the world to be a suitable guide for judging how the world actually is" (31). I move from Shrek to the question of incest in probing the rational justification for powerful moral intuitions. If Mark and Julie are close siblings who vacation together in France, decide to sleep together to deepen their relationship, use birth control, and cherish the memory of the experience without repeating it or making it public, why is it wrong? Is our appraisal of its wrongness a contingent expression of local norms, or should we say that in cases such as incest our "ick factor" is inseparable from moral facts? Shrek, then, anchors a debate between moral realists and anti-realists who propose either subjectivism or ethical relativism to explain our moral judgments. And Tom's question of the relationship between descriptive and evaluative properties of utterances remains in the foreground throughout the unit.

The work of philosophy often is directed toward solving a genuine, vexing problem, but it also can aim at dissolving pseudo-problems arising from conceptual confusion. Tom carefully illustrates the difference in his discussion of *Let's Do Nothing*, a story about two friends who try but ultimately fail to do nothing at all. Did they fail because they didn't try hard enough? Had they mastered the Tao concept of *wu-wei*, would friends Sal and Frankie have found success? Returning to philosophy of language, Tom distinguishes the meaning of a sentence from the meaning of a statement. The latter depends on the context of its utterance and often diverges from the sentence's literal meaning. For example, if I say "Great!" after you spill your drink on my first edition copy of *Philosophical Investigations*, I am inverting the literal meaning of the utterance. So, what kind of work is being done by "Let's do nothing"? Tom carefully shows that the sentence is self-defeating because it asks us both to engage in an activity (doing) and not to do so (nothing). Whatever qualifies as "doing" must be some specific activity. So Sal and Frankie don't need to master Taoism to do "nothing"; they just need to clear up some conceptual confusion and do something instead. I introduced *Let's Do Nothing* after my class assessed Descartes' proposed solution to the mind-body problem. Students generally agree that Descartes failed to address adequately the problem of causal interaction and were eager to see whether contemporary philosophers could do better. Then we turned to Ryle and I asked whether he tried to solve the mind-body problem or to dissolve it. Some students remarked that Cartesian dualism committed a cat-

egory mistake reminiscent of Frankie and Sal's search for "nothing." After all, Descartes' ghost in the machine is not a mysterious entity awaiting discovery but a confusion that philosophers such as Ryle have labored to "exorcise." Others suggested that Ryle had found an alternative solution in his appeal to his concept of mind as an ensemble of observable intelligent behaviors and dispositions to behave. I am convinced that students were more sensitive or attuned to Ryle's argument against Descartes because of their familiarity with *Let's Do Nothing*.

In past years, I introduced the problem of free will through thought experiments such as Locke's trapped conversationalist or the case of someone who was brutalized as a child and committed brutal crimes himself as an adult. The thought experiment teases out the necessary and sufficient conditions for freedom of will, and the case brings into relief the conditions for establishing moral responsibility. This year I had students sample "Cookies" instead. After

reading the story together, I asked students to assess Frog's definition of will power: "Will power is not doing something that you really want to do." I repeated Tom's question whether this definition withstands scrutiny: "If you really want something, don't you just go ahead and do it? And if you don't do that just show you didn't really want it?" Answering "yes" to both questions generates a self-contradiction in Frog's definition. As a teacher, I

appreciated Tom's direction in showing how we can remove the contradiction by characterizing free will as the mental capacity to reflect upon and evaluate our desires and to defeat the "motivational push" of desires that we choose not to fulfill. One reason that I agree with Tom's description of "Cookies" as a philosophical text is that it calls for careful thinking about what we mean by a capacity for free will and by the exercise of this capacity. Frog and Toad take a number of amusing steps to avoid eating more fattening cookies. All of them fail to deter Toad. For example, when Frog climbs a tall ladder and places the cookies on a shelf, Toad later climbs the ladder and retrieves the cookies for himself. Finally, Frog feeds the cookies to the birds. Does he now have will power? It could be argued that Frog exercises will power the moment he feeds cookies to the birds but not once the source of his temptation has been removed. Should we conclude, then, that at the end of the story Frog now lacks will power? Perhaps it is closer to the truth, Tom suggests, to say that al-

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though he no longer *exercises* will power, his *capacity* for free will is intact. “Cookies” is a conceptually rich introduction to the problem of will power. It has strong echoes in Frankfurt’s important tiered analysis of first and second order desires and grounding of personhood in having the will one wants. We also linked Cookies to “Escape from Spiderhead,” a disturbing story about a controlled pharmacological environment in which identifying desires as genuinely one’s own is no easy matter.

Some stories in Tom’s book are suggestive, even arresting, but lack sufficient guidance for teachers on how to pursue the relevant philosophical questions. For example, *Many Moons* raises important questions about epistemic relativism or constructivism through the story of a king who requests that his advisors retrieve the moon to cure his ailing daughter. Each advisor gives a different account of the moon—including its material size, and distance—to explain why the request is impossible. The princess does not despair since she believes the moon is no larger than her thumbnail and no further away than the tree outside her window. The scenario motivates epistemological questions well enough, but the discussion that follows lacks the scaffolding needed for teachers who lack familiarity with the debate in epistemology. I prefer using Richard Rorty’s discussion of the conflict between Galileo and Bellarmine or Winch’s confrontation between the anthropologist and the Azande believer in witchcraft and poison oracles. I also think Rorty and Winch can familiarize teachers with robust arguments in defense of epistemic relativism. For a careful, lucid rejection of epistemic relativism, I would recommend arguments outlined in Paul Boghossian’s *Fear of Knowledge*.

Perhaps my favorite in *Sneetch* is *Harold and the Magic Crayon*. It is a deeply imagined story that makes the imagined world of stories its theme. The power of Harold’s purple crayon transforms mere representations of things such as the ocean and the moon into the things themselves. Tom notes that according to a traditional view reaching back to Plato, representations of objects (symbolized as shadows in his allegory of the cave) are metaphysically “second class citizens.” If we draw from the later empiricist tradition, ideas are pale copies of directly perceived objects. But, as Tom points out, the empiricist’s distinction is doubtful once we grant that

the imagined world has greater intensity or vivacity than the world received by the senses. Tom also emphasizes that Harold deeply inhabits and interacts with his imagined world, and he does so according to rules that give his world genuine coherence. For example, he can’t go for a moonlit walk unless he has drawn a moon. Tom here gestures toward the virtual, interactive worlds of computer games and hints at the controversial distinction between duplication and simulation. The ending of Harold adds another layer of complexity to the metaphysical question. Harold is depicted as sleeping, but this is the “author’s” representation of Harold, not a scene from the world created by Harold’s crayon. I would say that Harold, like Cookies, is a genuinely philosophical text, one

that can help students challenge the characterization of imagined worlds as “second class citizens,” or mere stand-ins for real objects. But I’m not sure Tom’s brief mention of Kant goes far enough in helping teachers investigate alternative directions for inquiring into the nature of fiction, representation, or imagined possible worlds. Given Tom’s expertise in both aesthetics and metaphysics, I know teachers would be eager to learn more about how he explores these questions with his own students.

Again, my comments on *Sneetch* should not be seen as criticism but as

one teacher’s report of its promise and limitations in the high school classroom. I have used the book selectively for its unintended audience, and I recommend that my colleagues in high school teaching similarly use their judgment in choosing stories to share with their students. Perhaps they would decide to use *Yellow and Pink*, a disarming story that raises questions about the existence of God, or they might draw instead from the imaginative scenarios of Flew’s gardener, Paley’s watch, or Collins’s well-tuned radio to motivate and probe the design argument. I urge my colleagues to read *Sneetch* cover to cover and discover for themselves how children’s literature, informed by Tom Wartenberg’s expert philosophical guidance, can coax both wisdom and child-like wonder from their students. Having seen my own classes enlivened by the presence of Harold, Morris, and Shrek, I intend to take a further playful step by having students independently analyze philosophical themes addressed in children’s stories of their own choosing. As Toad might acknowledge, it’s a capacity that students can and should exercise. And surely even Morris would agree that Tom’s talent for teaching philosophy through children’s literature is well worth emulating. It would be a *moosetake* to believe otherwise.

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