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THE PHILOSOPHICAL PASSION OF THE JEW

Kyle the Philosopher

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More Than Just the Token Jewish Character

Like the other boys, Kyle appears two-dimensional. But there's more to him. He's more than just the token Jewish character. He's a passionate child whose chaotic mishaps with the other boys lead him to become more reflective, as he thinks deeply about the significance of their actions, both in terms of their moral consequences and in terms of what they imply about life and the world. In short, Kyle is the philosopher of South Park. He is a lover of wisdom, pursuing truth above all else (at least sometimes). For instance, in the episode "Cartmanland" Kyle questions how it could be that God, who apparently has a say in making the world a good place, allows Cartman to inherit one million dollars and buy his own amusement park. In "Tooth Fairy Tats 2000" Kyle becomes distraught when the boys discover that the Tooth Fairy doesn't really exist and begins to speculate about what other things adults have lied to him about. In "Toilet Paper" only Kyle really considers the moral problems of seeking revenge on Mrs. Driebel, after TPing her house. Because of Kyle's moral outlook the other boys sometimes keep their mischief from him. Just recall the episode "Two Days Before the Day After Tomorrow," where Stan and Cartman crash a speedboat into a beaver dam, causing the neighboring town to flood.

The Socratic Method and Ike's Wee Wee

In the episode “The Super Best Friends,” when the boys watch David Blaine perform magic tricks in South Park, Kyle becomes intrigued by his performance and wants to learn more. At the workshop, he comes to realize that he isn't happy and that he hasn't fully reached his potential in life yet. As he tells his mother, “I had no idea how unhappy I was until today.” We may be inclined to dismiss Kyle's revelation as the predictable outcome of a young impressionable mind being brainwashed by the sinister and maniacal Blaine. But Kyle's discoveries are not unique to this one occasion. Whether presenting his case to his parents for money to buy a Chinpokomon, or suggesting to his synagogue that the Jews need to make atonement for the crucifixion of Jesus, Kyle struggles to find the right thing to do in each situation. Indeed, Kyle seeks to find and understand the *good life*, the life constituted by doing the right thing – the life that gives meaning to the person living it.

The search for the good life sets Kyle on the path of philosophical questioning. His awareness that he is unhappy echoes Socrates (470–399 BCE) who, in Plato's (427–347 BCE) *Apology*, tells us that a person may falsely believe that he or she is happy.¹ Like Socrates, Kyle doesn't simply want to believe he is happy; rather, he wants to *know* that he *really* is happy, and not fooling himself. For Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The good life entails that you examine your life – know thyself – as well as the assumed values in your own tradition. Such values need to be re-examined to determine whether or not they are true and absolutely real. If they are not true, they should be discarded. But if they are true, then they should be properly defined and understood so that they serve as ideals to live by. This lifestyle of questioning, challenging, and defining the truths of the world is known as the *dialectic*, and serves as the foundation for the Socratic approach in philosophy of living a life in pursuit of knowledge.

The *Socratic method* involved questioning those who claimed to know and engaging people in philosophical dialogue in an attempt

¹ See Plato, *Plato's Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002).

to define the fundamental nature or essence of some idea or thing. Whether it was a question of virtue, piety, goodness, friendship, or soul, Socrates sought a proper definition of the idea or thing. If a universal definition could be found, then one could apply the definition to one's own particular life. For example, if I know what *virtue* or *piety* or *goodness* mean, in essence, then I will know how to act virtuously, or I can actually be pious, or I could begin to live the good life.

Kyle, like Socrates, cannot find happiness by following narrow tradition. Christians may have Santa during the Christmas holiday, but Kyle has Mr. Hankey, a more universal figure who serves as the picture of benevolence and joy to *all* people. Mr. Hankey satisfies the Socratic approach insofar as he is universal rather than particular. With the help of his Christmas Poo, Kyle is able to transcend the standard view of Christmas from the Christian tradition, and come to an understanding of the compassionate values that apply to all people, from all different traditions.

Kyle further demonstrates this Socratic lifestyle, continuing to pursue knowledge. For instance, when Kyle discovers that his younger brother, Ike, is being forced by the family to undergo circumcision, he becomes protective of Ike and is determined to prevent Ike from undergoing such "barbarism." But when he discovers that Ike is adopted, Kyle initially falls back on the unreflective response that since Ike is not related by blood, he has no responsibility to care for him. Thus Kyle confronts the question, what is family? His initial implicit answer is "those for whom we care that are related by blood." If Ike is family, then Kyle believes that the right thing to do would be to help him and save him from the circumcision. But with this initial definition of family in mind, Kyle no longer sees helping Ike as the right thing to do.

Fortunately, like Socrates, Kyle engages in dialectic, but this time he questions himself. As a result, Kyle determines that his initial definition of family is unsuccessful. He "learns something today," namely, that family is not limited by bloodline, but instead is open to others we love and care about. This new broader definition of family includes not simply his blood relatives, but also Ike, Stan, Kenny, and even Cartman. With firm knowledge and a definition of family in hand, Kyle determines the right way to act: he becomes reinvigorated with the belief that he *must* protect Ike from the upcoming circumcision,

and so does what he can to prevent it. Of course, Kyle isn't perfect. If he had only used the Socratic method to discover the true definition of circumcision he wouldn't have had this trouble in the first place. After all, his parents weren't going to have Ike's wee-wee cut off.

Is God Dead? Cartman's Money and Kyle's Hemorrhoid

In the episode "Cartmanland" Kyle's account of the good life is challenged. As a Jew, Kyle believes that all good ultimately comes from God's will and grace. If God exists, then God ultimately sets the world right. But when Kyle learns that Cartman has inherited one million dollars, he finds it an "impossible" event. To make matters worse, Kyle gets a hemorrhoid and suffers greatly. Frustrated with God, Kyle complains "all my life I was raised to believe in Jehovah! To believe that we should all behave a certain way and good things will come to us. I make mistakes, but every week I try to better myself. I'm always saying, 'You know, I learned something today' and what does this so-called God give me in return? A hemorrhoid. He doesn't make sense!" Unable to come to rational terms with this situation, Kyle calls both the pursuit of the good life and the existence of God into question: "I finally figured it out. You see, if someone like Cartman can get a million dollars and his own theme park, then there is no God. There's no God, dude."

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) reached the same conclusion as Kyle did – there is no God.² It's not that God once lived and now has died. Rather, God never existed. God was created through the

² See selections from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Books, 1959). Technically, the "death of God" was not so much a pronouncement of atheism as it was a description and prediction of the state of genuine belief in the God of Christianity. God, like a "party" with just three frat boys and some cheap beer, is dead. As an atheist, though, Nietzsche thought it was good that God is dead. No need to try to liven up this particular party.

imagination of people who felt they needed such a mighty and powerful being to guarantee a meaningful life. If God does not exist, then there is no good life, and life is without meaning. This is a very serious matter for Nietzsche, for by getting rid of God in our lives, our original view of a meaningful life is lost. Why should I bother striving to do what is right? Why shouldn't I just be a selfish jerk like Cartman? Nietzsche calls this result *nihilism*, or the view that there is no meaning or value to our lives and to the world. Since Kyle comes to agree with Nietzsche that God doesn't exist, he lapses into nihilism. With no meaning to life, his health deteriorates due to the hemorrhoid, and it looks as though Kyle is going to die. As the doctor explains: "I don't understand it. He's not fighting the infected hemorrhoid at all. It's like he, like he's lost all hope; he's just given up on life . . . Little fella's just lost his will to live."

Now, Nietzsche's advice to Kyle would be to see his struggle with the hemorrhoid as a metaphor for life. Human beings are constantly changing, constantly in a state of becoming. But our becoming doesn't have a pre-set direction; rather, we give ourselves a direction. We give ourselves meaning in life. Thus, human beings are creators and inventors of meaning. Whether we create Jehovah and the Jewish lifestyle, or a life like Mephisto's – geared towards cloning animals so that they have four asses – it is the individual who creates the meaningful life and the direction towards it. The Nietzschean ideal is the *overman*, the person who dynamically and continuously creates and betters himself. Just as Kyle fights the hemorrhoid, so too, the overman continuously struggles and strives to overcome and create himself in new ways.

But, alas, Kyle fails to become the *overman*. Rather than focus on his own struggle and self-creation, he is distracted and weakened by his envy and resentment of Cartman. While he acknowledges the meaninglessness of it all, Kyle retreats to the previous Socratic lifestyle of making sense of the world through universal definitions. Only when he learns that Cartman has lost his inheritance does Kyle effectively fight the hemorrhoid and recover. Now that Cartman is once again alone and miserable, Kyle sees the world can be set right. The good life is possible once again. Kyle *can* live a meaningful life, one in which good people are rewarded and selfish people are unhappy, and this means for Kyle that God does exist. As he tells God: "You *are* up there!"

Do You Think Dan Rather is Real?

While Socrates takes it for granted that there are things like virtue, piety, and goodness “out there” in reality, other philosophers hold that before we can begin to discover what sorts of things exist in the world, we need to first determine what human beings can really know. What do we *really* know in life? What things are we certain about? What do we know *really* exists in the world? How do we know it? How do we justify our beliefs? These questions are central to the branch of philosophy known as *epistemology*.

Many of Kyle’s beliefs are justified through his parents and teachers. But in the episode “The Tooth Fairy Tats 2000,” when the boys discover that there’s no Tooth Fairy, Kyle is in shock: “That can’t be. My parents wouldn’t lie to me.” He confronts his father, who admits that the Tooth Fairy isn’t real. Kyle worries that his source of justification is now unreliable, since his parents may lie to him about anything. And if he cannot trust his source, then he cannot say with certainty that he knows anything. Everything could be “all made up” so that “nothing’s real.”

Kyle slips further and further into *skepticism*, the view that what is typically taken to be knowledge may, in fact, not be justified. First, he begins to doubt the reality of other people he previously accepted as being real: “What about Dan Rather? Do you think he’s real?” Next, he begins to wonder whether or not he himself is real: “Oh my God, what if *I’m* not real? I mean, what if I’m just part of my *parents’* reality? What if this is all just somebody’s dream?” For all Kyle knows, he could be living a life of illusion like Neo in *The Matrix*.

Without a way to justify his beliefs, Kyle is unable to find any certainty about the world, including himself. The world around him could very well be a dream, and he too may only be part of a dream. While he previously thought he was real, he does not know even if he, himself, exists. Feeling lost, Kyle might turn to philosophy. He might read a number of books concerning what we can know about reality, the most important of which is *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes (1596–1650).³ Like Kyle, Descartes

³ See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999).

becomes dissatisfied with what he has learned from his upbringing. Having studied philosophy as a student, Descartes wonders whether or not the tradition from Socrates until his own time was correct concerning what they said about the world. In order to find certainty about the things he has come to believe to be true – that is, in order to find absolute, clear, indubitable knowledge – Descartes tries to doubt the truth of everything that he possibly can, no matter how far fetched his doubts may seem. Thus, Descartes becomes a skeptic in order to come up with absolute and certain knowledge. Descartes calls this process of meticulously and methodically doubting everything one can in order to obtain certainty, *systematic doubt*.

Like Kyle, Descartes comes to the skeptical view that this whole world and all of our experiences may be part of a dream. Or, for all he knows, there could be an Evil Deceiver who has God-like powers and has manipulated him into thinking that the world he experiences is real and that he is real. Like Kyle, then, Descartes holds that this world may very well be a dream and he may not exist. Further, both find this utter skepticism to be overwhelming. Descartes, for instance, feels as if he is drowning in a whirlpool of doubt and disbelief. He feels as though he can no longer function in the world given that he is left without any apparent certainty. The case is no better for Kyle: “I can’t deal with it, Stan. I mean, all the stuff I’ve been reading; I really don’t think I exist! Sometimes I think I can see time slowing down and my own existence fading.”

Descartes, however, ultimately saves himself from drowning in his doubt by coming to realize that there is one thing he cannot doubt: his own existence as a thinking thing. Even if there is an Evil Deceiver or *Matrix* that makes me believe in a world that is not real, I still cannot doubt that I exist as a thinking thing. In order to doubt that I exist, I must be thinking, since doubting requires thinking. But since I am thinking, I must exist, since thinking entails existence. And so, we get Descartes’ famous line: “I think, therefore I am.” Descartes’ own existence as one who thinks is certain and indubitable knowledge. Kyle comes to the same conclusion as Descartes: “You know, I learned something today. You see, the basis of all reasoning is the mind’s awareness of itself. What we think, the external objects we perceive are all like actors that come on and off stage. But our consciousness, the stage itself, is always present to us.” Now that he is

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justified in believing he is a conscious, thinking thing, Kyle is set to resume his pursuit of the good life.

What Have We Learned Today?

Like Socrates, Kyle pursues the good life by trying to come to know the virtues that help him determine the right thing to do. And while he doesn't completely embody the idea that life is open to creation (including God), Kyle's open-minded investigation into the world allows him to challenge the existence of God and see what the loss of God would entail. Further, Kyle's inquisitive nature makes him reflect upon what he really knows to be true, which he comes to discover after a meticulous examination of everything that he can doubt. Kyle *is* the philosopher of South Park.