

PHILOSOPHY IN
THE TWILIGHT ZONE

EDITED BY

NOËL CARROLL AND
LESTER H. HUNT

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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This edition first published 2009
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ,
United Kingdom

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Philosophy in the Twilight zone / edited by Noël Carroll and Lester H. Hunt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-4904-4 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4051-4905-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Twilight zone (Television program : 1959–1964)
2. Philosophy. I. Carroll, Noël, 1947–
- II. Hunt, Lester H., 1946–
PN1992.77.T87P45 2009
791.45'72—dc22

2008041556

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Dante by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Singapore by Ho Printing Pte Ltd

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INTRODUCTION

LESTER H. HUNT

The 156 episodes of the original *Twilight Zone* series (1959–64) constitute by far one of the most influential and enduringly popular of all dramatic series. It has been revived twice, and has served as the basis for a feature film, books of short stories, and a comic book. It has introduced many catch-phrases and mythic images into our culture. All five seasons are available on DVD.

The episodes were often quite consciously intended to provoke thought and argument about philosophical issues and ideas, and were very effective at doing so. The issues it treated included, for instance, those of skepticism in its various forms, the ethics of war and peace, the nature and value of privacy and personal dignity, the nature and value of knowledge (and of ignorance), the nature of love, the objectivity of judgments of value, the nature of happiness, of freedom, and of justice. In addition, some episodes just *are*, you might say, philosophical problems in themselves. They often violated the conventions of classical narration. They often committed spectacular violations of explanatory closure. As everyone knows, story lines would often include impossible events. An airliner flies through time. A man “overhears” the thoughts of others. A woman does not realize that she is dead. In a great many cases, as everyone knows,

the script makes no attempt to explain why or how they happened. The series required a generation of viewers to revise the expectations that guided them in interpreting and appreciating narratives, and challenged them to think about fundamental issues.

This book is for people who want to take up this challenge and reflect on these revised expectations. One's thinking on any issue is apt to be most effective if done together with a companion who can help one to identify and clarify issues. It can also help, though of course in a different way, if they take provocative positions on the issues involved, positions to which one might be inspired to respond. The essays in this volume are meant to provide such help and stimulus.

Except for the first chapter, which is biographical, these essays fall into three different groups: 1. Essays that use a single episode or pair of episodes as the basis for a discussion of some philosophical question. In effect, the events in the episode function as examples illustrating or otherwise shedding light on the ideas discussed in the essay; 2. Essays interpreting the series as a whole, or some episode or cycle or sub-genre of episodes; 3. Essays on aesthetic issues raised by distinctive features of the series, such as issues about genres, or about modernist narrational strategies.

The following is a rough guide to the content and purpose of each of the essays, and to a few of the connections between them.

Lester Hunt leads off with a chapter explaining how series creator Rod Serling became the philosophically interesting author he was in *The Twilight Zone*. He began his distinguished career as a writer of quite a different kind. That he became associated in the public mind with the narratives of such a fanciful or fantastic sort was the unpredictable result of a collision between talent, temperament, and circumstances that proved to be well beyond the author's control.

Noël Carroll discusses a large sub-genre of episodes, which he calls the Tales of Dread. Tales of dread are narrative fantasies in which a character is punished in a way that is both appropriate and mordantly humorous or ironic. Though the punishment is not meted out by any character depicted in the story, it seems so appropriate that one is left with the feeling that it is somehow intentional. The dread induced by the stories comes from the feeling they give one of a universe in which judgment is meted out by unseen powers characterized by diabolical wit.

The sub-genre that Carl Plantinga treats is in some ways the opposite of the one that concerns Carroll. While Carroll is concerned with episodes that, in a way, have more coherence than life often has, in which our hankerings for meaning and justice are all-too-fully satisfied, Plantinga is

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concerned with ones that, in a certain way, thwart our expectations and undermine our assumptions – namely, the ones with surprise endings. He is especially interested in the ones he calls “frame shifters,” in which the viewer’s frame of reference is somehow reversed in the end: the seemingly futuristic tale is actually set in the past, the tiny invading aliens are actually humans, and so forth. He argues that frame-shifting is a narrational strategy that enables the series to provoke thought even while using what is fundamentally traditionally entertaining Hollywood-style narration.

Mary Sirridge discusses a sub-genre that is subtly related to the one discussed by Plantinga: these are episodes in which the audience is fooled by “the treachery of the commonplace.” The audience either wrongly accepts at face value what the problem is that the characters are facing (the problem seems to be the possibility that the aliens will colonize humans, whereas the real problem is that they will eat them), or they fail to question some commonplace idea that is so familiar that it does not even present itself to the human mind as an idea. The result of these episodes, she finds, is to show us the limits of our knowledge and, when they venture from the realm of epistemology into that of politics, the limits of authority.

The one essay in this volume that addresses a philosophical issue raised by the entire series, and not just by some of its episodes or narrational strategies, is Richard Hanley’s “Where is the Twilight Zone?” He asks whether there could be such a place as “the twilight zone” and comes to the surprising conclusion that, yes, there probably could be, and that the idea of extra spatial dimensions offers the best possible hope of accounting for the goings-on in the Zone, and of its ability to interact with beings in our world.

Susan Feagin explores Sartrean existentialist themes and a critique of Cartesian certainties about personal identity in the episode “Five Characters in Search of an Exit,” and although she does find un-existentialist hopes of redeeming contact with other people offered in “In His Image,” the hopes, she points out, are not presented by a person, but by a machine. Overall, she says, though the series often does pursue existentialist themes, it is generally too optimistic to have an overall existentialist sensibility.

Lewis Gordon discusses the treatment of racial issues in the series. He points out that the indirect, ambiguous way in which it treats these issues is one strategy for dealing with such issues in the context of a racist society: it is a subject that the intended audience wishes to avoid. A viewer who sees the somewhat Caucasian-looking aliens, the Kanamits, in “To

Serve Man” is free to ignore the fact that their homicidal practices and indeed their very name associates them with a practice that white stereotypes associate with African races: namely, cannibalism.

The remaining essays focus on particular episodes of *The Twilight Zone*. Thomas Wartenberg discusses “The Odyssey of Flight 33.” He takes an experience he had as a child – anxiously listening to an unseen plane overhead with the feeling that this might be flight 33, even though he knew that flight 33 was fictional – as emblematic of something the series very often did. In a number of ways, it would suggest the possibility of fictional worlds overlapping with the real world, thus opening up realms of disturbing possibilities for the viewer.

Sheila Lintott finds in “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” an opportunity to reconsider and sharpen our views about the nature of truth. That episode, she maintains, illustrates a reason why the seemingly most intuitive theory of the nature of truth – the “correspondence theory,” the view that a belief that a thing is so is true if and only if that thing is actually so – is actually an inadequate theory, at least if it is not supplemented somehow by one of this theory’s main rivals: the so-called “coherence theory.”

Aeon Skoble finds in “Nick of Time” some useful wisdom about the relationship between freedom and reason. Don, the character who seems to be threatened with enslavement by a devilish (in more senses than one) fortune-dispensing machine, is actually held in bondage by his own irrational thinking about it. This episode is in a way atypical of the series in that the plot turns out to include no supernatural or science fiction elements, but Skoble points out that situations in which a character’s real problem is his or her own failures of rationality is a theme that recurs in other episodes as well.

Aaron Smuts consults the episode “The Little People,” in which a space traveler forces tiny aliens to worship him, only to be accidentally crushed to death by voyagers larger than himself, for insight into the issue of what *would* make a being worthy of worship. He finds that the episode not only suggests but actually provides us with reason to think that mere awe-inspiring power no matter how great would be enough.

James S. Taylor defends the position taken by the episode “Nothing in the Dark” in which Wanda Dunn hides from the world, depriving herself of all the pleasures of life, in order to avoid fatal contact with “Mr. Death.” When Mr. Death finally appears, he tells her that death is nothing to be afraid of. Taylor argues that this is quite right: to die is not to suffer a harm at all. Rather, as in the case of Wanda Dunn, it is the *fear* of death that is actually, seriously harmful.

I

“AND NOW, ROD SERLING, CREATOR OF *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*”

THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

LESTER H. HUNT

It has been said that the so-called “*auteur* theory,” the idea that the director is the true “author” of a film is “probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today.”¹ Those who are tempted to find in this idea an immutable truth might do well to remember that, for a while during the sixties, there were several American television series in which the “author” in this sense, that is, the artistic personality who dominated the show and gave it its peculiar aesthetic, was a *literal* author: that is, a person who writes.² Examples included Stirling Silliphant’s *Route 66* (1960–4) and Reginald Rose’s *The Defenders* (1961–5). The last of them was *The Waltons* (1972–81), by *Twilight Zone* alumnus Earl Hamner, Jr. Probably the finest and surely the best-remembered of this distinguished company was Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone*. It was very much a writer’s show. In his on-screen introduction to each episode, Serling always named the author of the episode, if it was someone other than himself, and always named the author of the original story if it was an adaptation. This must have represented an all-time high in respect shown for writers on primetime, network television. Indeed, Serling’s on-screen appearances soon made him the best known, most widely

recognized living writer in the world. Being a writer has never seemed so . . . well, so *cool*. In this chapter I would like to say a few words about how he came to be the writer we know, and how he came to create *The Twilight Zone*.³

Rodman Edward Serling was born on Christmas day in 1924 in Syracuse, New York, and grew up in the small southern tier town of Binghamton, where his father was the town butcher. There is a certain irony in this birth date, for Serling was Jewish, but his parents were assimilated Jews and the family always celebrated Christmas, as indeed Serling – who eventually converted to Unitarianism – did all his life. He graduated from Antioch College in Ohio, where he majored in creative writing. Antioch, one of the centers of “progressive education” earlier in the twentieth century, was a hotbed of liberal social idealism, a point of view that Serling absorbed and held as long as he lived. He also had a lifelong affinity for the academic ethos, and more than once he took a very large cut in pay in order to teach creative writing at his alma mater.

He wrote for radio stations in Ohio during the twilight years of that medium and, seeing the words of doom on the wall, began to write for the new medium of television. He sold his first script to network TV in 1950 for \$100.⁴ There could not have been a better time for a writer to enter any medium. It was the beginning of the age of live television drama, and the industry, then based in New York, was quickly developing a ravenous appetite for scripts. It also had an aching need for script writers who had two skills that Serling had developed in radio: the ability to write rapidly and copiously, and a knack for writing words that would take a specific number of minutes to say. Television, like radio and unlike movies and staged drama, was despotically ruled by the clock.

Serling thrived in this environment. Indeed several writers did. The writers who got their start writing for live TV included Paddy Chayefsky, Horton Foote, Reginald Rose, and Gore Vidal. For some reason that no one has explained, several of these people almost immediately became famous. Viewers recognized their names and the distinctive qualities of their work. Reviews of a show would to a considerable extent be reviews of the contribution of the writer, who would be mentioned by name. During these years, Serling won an Emmy for his teleplay “Patterns” (aired in 1955), and another for “Requiem for a Heavyweight” (1956). In 1956, Simon and Schuster published a book, titled *Patterns*, containing four of his teleplays and his “commentaries” on each one.⁵ All this had happened by the time he was barely more than 30 years old.

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I have suggested that early live TV was more like radio than film with respect to its being ruled by the clock. It had two other characteristics that are worth pausing to notice, because both carried over into the *Twilight Zone* aesthetic. First, they tended to convey narrative, as radio drama did, more by means of dialogue rather than depicted action. Second, they generally used few, often rather cramped, sets. Given that the genre category of *The Twilight Zone* – fantasy and science fiction – is one that we naturally associate with action and visual effects, it is really remarkable how many of the episodes consist mainly of two or three characters talking to each other. In addition, the shows typically use very few sets, sometimes one or two, very often no more than three. Some of the most memorable episodes take place virtually entirely within a single room (for instance, “A Game of Pool”). In several, the claustrophobia-inducing qualities of a single cramped set are actually part of the thematic content of the episode (“Six Characters in Search of an Exit,” “Nervous Man in a Four Dollar Room,” “The Last Night of a Jockey”). These characteristics of the series give it a certain quality, both cerebral and stylized, that seem to enhance its effectiveness as a means of communicating ideas.⁶

In several respects, though, the Rod Serling, who first achieved fame in the fifties, was a different sort of writer from the one that fans of *The Twilight Zone* know. In an article written while Serling’s career was still soaring, Ayn Rand described the difference like this:

Rod Serling, one of the most talented writers of television, started as a Naturalist, dramatizing controversial journalistic issues of the moment, never taking sides, conspicuously avoiding value-judgements, writing about ordinary people – except that these people spoke the most beautifully, eloquently romanticized dialogue, a purposeful, intellectual, sharply focused dialogue-by-essentials, of a kind that people do not speak in “real life,” but should. Prompted, apparently, by the need to give full scope to his colorful imagination and brilliant sense of drama, Rod Serling turned to Romanticism – but placed his stories in another dimension, in *The Twilight Zone*.⁷

On at least one point, this is a penetrating description of the transformation that Serling underwent. Though I would rather say that the early Serling tended to conspicuously *appear* to avoid value-judgments, and prefer to call Serling’s early style Realist rather than Naturalist, it is true that his work before *The Twilight Zone* was mainly in the aesthetic camp of Realists and Naturalists.⁸ In 1949, Serling attended the first New York run of *Death of a Salesman*, with Lee J. Cobb as Willie Loman, and it seems to have made a powerful impression on him.⁹ “Patterns” can be read as

a sort of corporate *Death of a Salesman*, told from the point of view of one of the newcomers who are edging the Willie Loman character out. More generally, all of Serling's more ambitious early teleplays bear the most salient features of *Salesman*: they depict ordinary people dealing with today's problems and speaking today's language (or, more exactly, an idealized version of it). Their strongest emotional effects were achieved by setting these ordinary people on a collision-course with some sort of climactic result. It was the sort of thing that reviewers liked to describe as "gritty," "unsparing," and "hard-hitting."

His work in *The Twilight Zone* is not merely different from this; it is, as Rand suggests, in an altogether different aesthetic tradition. In *The Twilight Zone*, he is no longer in the Realist or Naturalist camp of writers like Arthur Miller and Frank Norris; he is in the Romantic, allegorical, or fantastical school of Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In Serling's life, the advent of *The Twilight Zone* was almost like one of the surprise endings that seemed typical of a *Twilight Zone* episode, those ironic twists that Serling sometimes called "the snappers." It was unpredictable and yet somehow logical after the fact. What was the nature of the logic that brought this transformation about? Rand speculates that he was driven in that direction by his own inner necessity. There I think she is simply wrong. Curiously enough, *The Twilight Zone*, probably Serling's most lasting achievement, was dragged out of him by circumstances beyond his control, almost against (as he saw it) his better judgment.

The origin of the transformation lay in a feature of early live television drama that I have not touched on yet, one that was not at all to Serling's liking. It is somewhat difficult for us to fully appreciate today, because it is somewhat alien to the nature of the mass media as they exist in our time. However, it is important for understanding the way Serling's career eventually developed. Everyone knows that network television gets its money from paid commercial announcements. In those days, this gave the sponsor a remarkable amount of control over program content. Sponsors often seemed to think of the shows as long, lavish, expensive ads for their products. Indeed, as in the days of radio, the name of the sponsor was often part of the title of the show. This was true, for instance, of the first of the hour-long live dramatic shows, *Kraft Television Theater* (premiered in 1947), and it was also true of the very last of them, *Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theater* (cancelled in 1965). Representatives of sponsoring companies, usually employees of their advertising agencies, actually read scripts before they were produced, and they often demanded changes. They nearly always got what they demanded. This

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influence took two forms, one of which was petty and the other potentially devastating.

In those days, the advertising industry was in the grip of a theory that held that consumer purchases are conditioned by factors that are a) extremely subtle, but b) identifiable by the clever people who work in the advertising industry. One practice that resulted from this curious theory was that of avoiding all mention of the competitor's product. In an early script for *The Twilight Zone*, a British navy officer orders a tray of tea to be brought up to the bridge. The sponsor, manufacturer of Sanka instant coffee, objected to the word "tea." The offending phrase, Serling tells us, was changed to "a tray."¹⁰ Another practice, often just as silly as this one, was to avoid anything that would associate one's own product with something unpleasant. To give another of Serling's examples, in the original, *Playhouse 90* version of "Judgment at Nuremberg," one of the sponsors, a consortium of gas companies, had every mention of "gassing" and "gas ovens" expunged, evidently for fear that the viewers would unconsciously associate their product with Nazi genocide.

This sort of interference was annoying at best, degrading at worst, but Serling could put up with it when he had to. There was another sort of interference that was much deadlier, though evidently based on the same sort of thinking. The same instincts and assumptions that prompted advertisers to avoid associating their product with anything unpleasant also led them to avoid anything that might make anyone angry. The word that inevitably sprang up in these situations was "controversy." "Controversial" subjects tend to cause people to write angry letters to the network and threaten to do things like not buy the sponsor's product. Such subjects are therefore to be avoided altogether. Serling's early career, from its beginning up to the end of *The Twilight Zone's* five-season run, can be seen as a series of responses to this practice.

One response was, quite simply, to argue against it. He was good at this and often did it in public. In the long introductory essay in the *Patterns* book, titled "About Writing for Television," Serling mounts his most sustained argument against television censorship on the part of sponsors. The core of his case consists of two narratives. These are the sad stories (sad as he tells them, at any rate) of two scripts of his that were produced in 1956. Both stories recounted events that were disappointing to him, one of them much more bitterly so than the other.

The first of these scripts was "The Arena" (directed by Franklin Schaffner), which aired on *Studio One* on Monday April 9 of that year. The title refers to the United States Senate, indicating that it will be treated