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the BiG BANG THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS, ARISTOTLE, LOCKE

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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THE BIG BANG THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY

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Edited by Dean A. Kowalski

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When I Write My Memoirs, You Can Expect a Very Effusive Footnote—and Perhaps a Signed Copy

—Dr. Sheldon Cooper, "The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation"

I would like to thank all of the contributing authors. Each was a pleasure to work with, and many of them participated in voluminous e-mail exchanges and provided multiple drafts. Not one of them called me a giant "dic-tator," even though I may have come close to deserving that Sheldon-esque moniker on occasion. I would also like to thank my wife, Patricia, for indulging me in yet one more philosophy and pop culture book. Her patience knows no bounds. I must note Nicholas and Cassie; although they interrupted their dad's "research" numerous times, they also inspired me (and now flawlessly use the term *Bazinga*). And Joseph Foy continues to inspire me as a colleague and a (complete) friend.

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As I was composing this volume, I was often reminded of the countless hours I had spent with my siblings in front of the television, giggling at shows like *The Big Bang Theory*. I dedicate this book to them and all the happy memories we shared as kids:

To Amber, Beth, and Corey

INTRODUCTION

“Unraveling the Mysteries”

Dean A. Kowalski

It took nearly fourteen billion years, but you finally hold in your hands *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy.* Other bookstore browsers are perusing volumes such as *Bernie Bunny Has Two Daddies Now* or *Jerry the Gerbil and the Bullies on the Bus*, but they lack the basic social skills that you and I take for granted. Those dumbasses will probably buy a different book. But not you. You’ll buy this one because you sit at the cool table—fo’ shizzle. With receipt in hand, you’ll run home like the Flash, pour your favorite bowl of cereal (with a quarter cup of milk), and find *your* favorite spot on the couch.

There are books that debate math, science, and history; there are books that help you build walls or even pyramids; there are even books that discuss Neanderthals with tools and autotrophs that drool. This book discusses philosophy, but you don’t need an IQ of 187 to enjoy it. I swear to cow! As you’ll see, the philosophy is theoretical, but the fun is real.

Philosophers ponder the “big questions” about what is “really real,” how we ought to behave, and whether we know anything at all. Philosophers tend to reexamine what intellectual greats of the past have said about such “big questions.” Yet not quite like this. In this book, you’ll have the chance to ponder what Aristotle might say about the life Sheldon leads, why Thomas Hobbes would applaud the roommate agreement, and whom Immanuel Kant would

treat with haughty derision for weaving “un-unravelable webs.”

Yes, some philosophy books attempt to explain the nature of science and why it’s so important to study, but, inexplicably, they do so without references to Darth Vader Force-chokes, spherical chicken jokes, or oompa-loompas. Go figure. Rarely do philosophy books explore whether comic book–wielding geeks can lead the good life, or whether they can know enough science to tear the mask off nature and stare at the face of God. Rarer still are explorations into how socially awkward, Superhero-loving brainiacs meaningfully interact with down-to-earth beauties from India or the Cheesecake Factory. I know of none that investigate the evilness of Wil Wheaton. This book is a Saturnalia miracle!

No, I am not sassing you in Eskimo talk. Begin turning pages to see what I mean. As you continue to explore your new favorite philosophy book, you’ll learn that regardless of our differences and Sheldon-like idiosyncrasies, we are not merely atoms randomly banging into one another. We are persons, none of us perfect, who seek meaningful relationships with others, even if doing so doesn’t always make perfect scientific sense. (No, Sheldon, that’s not sarcasm—even *you* cannot completely avoid the “inexplicable need for human contact.”)

Okay, I admit that there are some things this book won’t do for you. It won’t help you clone your own Leonard Nimoy, build a “Kwipke Kwipplah,” or single-handedly win a Physics Bowl. It may not help you pick up Summer Glau on a train or make you forget the betrayal you still feel over FOX canceling *Firefly.* But it will make you laugh. Just as important, it will help you begin to unravel some of life’s most profound mysteries—as you bask in the comforting glow of your luminescent fish nightlight.

So, what’s your hesitation? Pull that fifty dollar bill you have stashed in Green Lantern’s firm buttocks and start reading! Oh, wait—the humanities. Please donate the remainder of your fifty dollars to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Bazinga!

PART ONE

“IT ALL BEGAN ON A WARM SUMMER’S EVENING IN GREECE”: ARISTOTELIAN INSIGHTS

Chapter 1

ARISTOTLE ON SHELDON COOPER: ANCIENT GREEK MEETS MODERN GEEK

Greg Littmann

> If I may be permitted to speak again, Doctor Sheldon Cooper for the win.
>
> *—Dr. Sheldon Cooper, "The White Asparagus Triangulation"*

Should you live like Sheldon Cooper? Think hard, because you don't have the luxury of not making a choice. Fourteen billion years after the Big Bang, evolution has finally produced a type of animal, human beings, that must choose how it will live. As Sheldon himself points out in "The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization," "We have to take in nourishment, expel waste, and inhale enough oxygen to keep our cells from dying. Everything else is optional." Should we devote ourselves to learning more about the world around us? Is it alright to spend vast amounts of time reading comics or watching television? Would it be better to neglect our social lives so that we can spare more time for other things? The geeky life of a Sheldon may be a new option in human history, but the question of how we should live is a very ancient one.

In this chapter, we'll examine the question of how we should live by asking how the life of Sheldon stacks up against the ideal set forth by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, one of the most influential thinkers of all times. The interesting thing about looking at Sheldon from

Aristotle's perspective is the degree to which this ancient conception of living well is fulfilled by a very modern geek such as Sheldon. The goal here is not to take Aristotle as a guru whose answers must be accepted, but to cast light on our condition to help us consider for ourselves the most important question we face: "How should we live?" Before we bring on Aristotle, though, we had better start with the question "What is it to live the life of Sheldon?"

The Life of the Mind

> Bernadette: Sheldon, when was the last time you got any sleep?
>
> Sheldon: I don't know. Two, three days. Not important. I don't need sleep, I need answers. I need to determine where in this swamp of unbalanced formulas squateth the toad of truth.[1]

If there is one thing that sets Sheldon apart, it is that he has given his life over almost entirely to mental activity. He not only *works* with his mind, but when he isn't working, he finds recreation in imagination and puzzle-solving. The idea of losing his intelligence frightens Sheldon more than the idea of losing his life. When Amy suggests in "The Thespian Catalyst" that he burn the memories of bad student evaluations from his brain with a laser, he refuses on the grounds that "One slip of the hand and suddenly I'm sitting in the Engineering Department building doodads with Wolowitz."

In fact, Sheldon doesn't identify with his body at all. He would as happily alter it as he would upgrade any machine. In "The Financial Permeability," he reveals his hope that scientists will soon "develop an affordable technology to fuse my skeleton with adamantium like Wolverine." By choice, he would abandon his body altogether. In "The Cruciferous Vegetable Amplification," he looks forward to

“the singularity . . . when man will be able to transfer his consciousness into machines and achieve immortality.” Furthermore, he’s flattered to be told that he resembles C3PO, and one of his goals is to be a thinking satellite in geostationary orbit. Compare this to Raj’s attitude—although Raj would also be happy to upgrade to a different body, his ideal is not a body built for pure thought, but for pure pleasure. In “The Monopolar Expedition,” he muses, “My religion teaches that if we suffer in this life, we are rewarded in the next. Three months at the North Pole with Sheldon and I’m reborn as a well-hung billionaire with wings.”

Sheldon is largely happy to forgo mere bodily pleasures. It is true, he’s *fussy* about the condition of his body—his food must be exactly right, the temperature must be exactly right, he must be sitting on *his* cushion in *his* place on the couch. Yet his body is a distracting source of discontent, rather than a source of pleasure. Sex is particularly uninteresting to him. As he derisively notes in “The Dumpling Paradox,” all sex has to offer is “nudity, orgasms, and human contact.” In “The Cooper-Nowitzki Theorem,” Penny asks Leonard, “What’s his deal? Is it girls? Guys? Sockpuppets?” and Leonard confesses, “Honestly, we’ve been operating under the assumption that he has no deal.” In this regard, Sheldon thinks that the rest of us should be more like him. In “The Financial Permeability,” he says of Leonard, “My theory is that his lack of focus [on work] stems from an overdeveloped sex drive.” Sheldon holds the very idea of sex in such contempt that in “The Desperation Emanation,” he follows his offer to make love to Amy with a cry of “Bazinga!” Conversely, Leonard, Raj, and Howard see value in the pleasures of sex. Howard arguably regards his interest in sex as an essential feature of himself. In “The Nerdvana Annihilation,” when Penny tells Leonard, “It is the

things you love that make you who you are," Howard interjects, "I guess that makes me large breasts."

The Ancient Greek and the Modern Geek

> Sheldon: I'm a physicist. I have a working knowledge of the entire universe and everything it contains.
>
> Penny: Who's Radiohead?
>
> Sheldon: I have a working knowledge of the *important* things.[2]

Is Sheldon right that the best life for a human being is a life of the intellect? Socrates (470–399 BCE), Plato (428–348 BCE), and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), just to tag ancient Greek philosophy's "big three," all stressed the importance of intellectual development and activity over indulging the body. The same is true of prominent ancient philosophical sects such as the Cynics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics.

Aristotle believed that you can tell the function of something from what it does best. A DVD player is the best thing for playing DVDs—that's the function of a DVD player. A screwdriver is the best thing for unscrewing screws from the back of your TiVo to install a larger hard drive—screwing and unscrewing is the function of a screwdriver. A fish is the best at swimming, so it is the function of a fish to swim. A horse is the best at galloping, so galloping is the function of a horse.

Looked at from this perspective, humanity doesn't seem to be good for much. Compared to the most capable animals in each category, we humans are slow, weak, clumsy, and oblivious—a slab of fresh, fatty meat on two useless little legs. What humans *are* relatively good at, though, is *thinking.* In fact, we are better at thinking than anything else in existence (yet, as far as we know). So our function is

to think, and a life of thinking well habitually is the best life for a human being. Aristotle wasn't suggesting that we should never exercise, never have sex, or otherwise refrain from bodily activity. Given the sort of creatures we are, that simply wouldn't be practical. The body is there, however, to support a life of mental activity—it is *mental activity* that is the entire *point* of being human. Aristotle wrote "that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man."[3] Indeed, Aristotle thought that the *ideal* sort of existence would consist in nothing *but* pure thought, a life of uninterrupted Godlike contemplation.[4] This sounds not so very different from Sheldon's fantasy of being a mechanical satellite, thinking away in space. So, would Aristotle advise us to be like Sheldon? Is this the best life for a human being? The rise of geek culture has received too little attention from scholars of Aristotle, because the appearance and proliferation of geeky intellectuals such as Sheldon, Leonard, Raj, and Howard pose significant new problems for the Aristotelian account of living well. Geeks, after all, devote their intellectual activity to the *weirdest things.*

Some geeky obsessions, Aristotle would definitely applaud. Aristotle stressed the importance of observing and theorizing to learn more about the universe, and he wrote widely to spread his observations and theories about the world and the cosmos, contributing to biology, botany, logic, mathematics, and medicine. Enormously influential in the history of thought, he has as good a claim as anyone to being the father of science.

Aristotle said that the difference between the educated and the uneducated is as great as that between the living and the dead.[5] So Sheldon's and Leonard's work in physics and Raj's work in astronomy would impress Aristotle

enormously, and he would respect Howard's somewhat lesser Ph.D.-less education.

Aristotle would even approve of many of Sheldon's obsessions that might seem the most ridiculous to someone without a curious mind. A discussion about "the scientific foundations of interstellar flight on a silver surf board," as conducted in "The Excelsior Acquisition," is an examination of the laws of physics, even if the motivation is unusual. Lectures on the correct undergarments for a medieval knight or what medieval bosoms would say if they could speak, as presented in "The Codpiece Topology," rest on a mastery of history—a subject that Aristotle held in high regard. Even turning lights in China on and off over the Internet, as performed in "The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization," is a scientific experiment of sorts, exploring the limits of new technology. Arguments over whether the Terminator can be part of a causal loop when time traveling, as discussed in "The Terminator Decoupling," or whether *Star Trek*–style teleportation would constitute death, as considered in "The Jerusalem Duality," concern very real and very important *philosophical* issues. It's just that they use examples drawn from popular culture. Greek philosophers did that sort of thing all of the time, though. Aristotle, for instance, used Hector from the *Iliad* to investigate courage and Neoptolemus from Sophocles' play *Philoctetes* to investigate self-mastery.

The Joy of Geekdom

> Penny: My God! You are grown men. How can you waste your lives with these stupid toys and costumes and comic books?[6]

Admittedly, some of Sheldon's obsessions seem both intellectually demanding and utterly *trivial.* For starters, he's knowledgeable about subjects that arguably just don't

matter that much. He is an expert on the history of the X-Men, for instance, and has an expansive Klingon vocabulary. He devotes himself to challenging puzzles that resolve no real-world issues. He's a master of 3D chess and old text adventure games such as *Zork* and, as we saw in "The Hamburger Postulate," will painstakingly recreate the Battle of Gettysburg with condiments just to see what would have happened if the North had been reinforced by Sauron's Orcs and the South by superheroes and Indian gods. He has also clearly spent much time and effort mastering the strategies of popular games such as the MMORPGs *World of Warcraft* and *Age of Conan* and the *Magic: The Gathering*–like card game *Mystic Warlords of Ka-'a.* Sheldon will attend to problems in popular culture that have no bearing on real-world issues just as quickly as he will attend to problems that do. For example, he carefully considers the questions of how zombies eat and vampires shave in "The Benefactor Factor" and how Superman can clean his costume when it gets dirty in "The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis."

Similarly, Sheldon is passionate about art, but not the sort of art that is traditionally accorded status among intellectuals. He's a connoisseur of television, being devoted to *Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who, Firefly, Star Gate, Star Trek* in all of its incarnations, and more (but *not Babylon 5*!). His love of cinema is so great that he can't stand the thought of being late to a screening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with twenty-one seconds of unseen footage, and he is willing to lose his friends rather than part with a genuine ring prop from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. His greatest artistic passion is literature and, in particular, comic books. The mere smell of them can send him into rapture, and he collects and dresses up in anything associated with his comic book heroes. Aristotle thought that pleasure is good in itself, but it must be pleasure gained from a worthy

activity. Is such frivolity really a worthy activity for a sharp mind?

What makes a mental activity worthy, though? For Aristotle, the mere fact that a mental activity deals with fiction does not make it trivial. Indeed, he claimed that "Poetry . . . is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."[7] That is, poetry is more philosophical and significant than history, because history deals only with what *has* happened, while poetry explores what *could* happen and so has a far more universal scope. In his *Politics*, Aristotle stressed the essential importance of poetry and literature in education, and he wrote a great deal about what makes for good art in his *Poetics.*[8]

Aristotle saw art as serving two legitimate goals beyond offering mere relaxation. First, art can educate us; second, art can improve us as human beings. Art educates us by allowing us to explore the human condition and so learn more about ourselves. By examining theoretical situations, such as what happens to four friends who each crave a prop ring from *The Lord of the Rings*, we can learn more about human nature than if we had only examined actual cases of human behavior. Theater edifies us by allowing us to purge our negative emotions. Tragedy, for instance, edifies us through catharsis, through feeling negative emotions such as fear and pity on behalf of fictional characters. Music edifies us in a similar manner, rousing our emotions and so allowing us to get them out of our systems. What about comedy? Aristotle also wrote about comedy, but unfortunately, the second book of the *Poetics*, containing these writings, has been lost. We'll just have to continue watching *The Big Bang Theory* and consider the matter for ourselves.

Geeky Fun and the Purpose of Life

> Leonard: [Sheldon]'s asking if we can come as anyone from science fiction, fantasy . . .
>
> Penny: Sure.
>
> Sheldon: What about comic books . . . anime . . . TV, film, D&D, manga, Greek gods, Roman gods, Norse gods?[9]

Even Sheldon would accept that his preferred art forms are of dubious educational value. There is very little to be learned about *science* from watching *Battlestar Galactica* or *Star Trek* and less still from the surreal tales of *Star Wars* or *Doctor Who.* Similarly, it's unlikely that anyone will improve his or her scientific understanding by reading comic books devoted to the adventures of Batman, Flash, Green Lantern, Hulk, or the X-Men. Could such artworks instead teach us about *humanity*, as Aristotle desired? They might have something to teach Sheldon, given his disconnection from the human race, but that doesn't address the issue of what *we* should do. Is it alright for *us* to kick back and read a "graphic novel" about a costumed crime fighter with weird powers, or is it a shameful waste of our intellectual potential? To be honest, I don't think that there is *much* to be learned directly about human nature from the sort of art that Sheldon enjoys, particularly when you consider that unlike Aristotle's options, our available alternatives include well-researched nonfiction books about human psychology and culture.

On the other hand, works of the imagination can be extremely useful as food for thought. As we know, Sheldon uses franchises such as *Silver Surfer, The Terminator*, and *Star Trek* as inspiration for questions about physics, time and causation, and personal identity. Such fantasies, often *because* of the highly unusual situations that arise in them,

can be very handy for exploring such issues, as well as issues relating to human nature, morality, or . . . just about anything, really. This very book you hold, *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy*, is devoted to using the fictional world of *The Big Bang Theory* to explore important philosophical questions—questions such as "What sort of life is best for a human being?" Similar books explore important philosophical questions by relating them to superheroes and supervillains, computer games like *World of Warcraft*; science fiction programs like *Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who*, and *Star Trek*; and fantasy works like *The Lord of the Rings.* If Aristotle held that poetry is more philosophical than history because poetry allows us to explore hypothetical situations, then perhaps outlandish literature is the most philosophical of all, because the range of hypothetical situations that arises is so great. So the issue for us isn't whether it's alright to kick back with a graphic novel (or a sci-fi movie or a computer game) per se, but whether we will be passive recipients of art or instead *use* it to help us think about humanity and the universe.

What about the use of art as a source of catharsis? It seems likely that Sheldon's preferred forms of entertainment can perform this function, if any art does. Sheldon's preferred genre might be described as "amazing adventure." Though he nitpicks plausibility, he'll suspend his disbelief for the sake of a thrilling fantasy. So what if Green Lantern's ring makes no sense, given the laws of physics? Swallowing the absurdity is a small price for Sheldon to pay for the fun of seeing a man with a ring that can do *anything* go up against an endless queue of supervillains. If tragedy allows us to purge our fear by experiencing it on behalf of others, then adventure presumably purges both our fear and our restless excitement. If an adventure truly grips us, then there is a sense of release when it is resolved, a shrugging off of the tension we carry.

Given that Aristotle justified art in terms of its educational and edificatory value, then he might approve both of Sheldon's art *and* his games. Aristotle, in his defense of the importance of music in education, stated, "It is clear . . . that there are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake."[10] If Sheldon's games exercise his mental muscles, and his art gives him food for thought and emotional catharsis, then perhaps Aristotle could allow for the usefulness of both, even if they often revolve around themes of no importance in themselves, such as whether an imaginary hobbit will manage to toss an imaginary ring into an imaginary volcano.

Trial of a Nerd

Wil Wheaton: What is wrong with him?

Stuart: Everyone has a different theory.[11]

So much for the intellectual activities that Sheldon *does* engage in. How would Aristotle feel about the intellectual activities that Sheldon *doesn't* engage in? Despite his knowledge of history and tendency to philosophize, he's contemptuous of the Humanities in general. So great is his disdain that in "The Benefactor Factor," Sheldon's main motivation for ensuring that a large donation goes to the Physics Department is that otherwise, it will go to the *humanities.* Amy horrifies him with the thought of "millions of dollars being showered on poets, literary theories, and students of gender studies." Conversely, Aristotle held poetry in high esteem, wrote extensively on literary theory, and theorized about the nature of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, Aristotle regarded the study of human nature, culture, and politics to be every bit as important as the study of the natural world.