

From Socrates to *Seinfeld*: What's the Deal With Nothing?

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

William Irwin (ed.) (1999) *Seinfeld and Philosophy:
A Book About Everything and Nothing*
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The show *Seinfeld* is an American television phenomenon. Since the show now continues in perpetuity in syndicated reruns as well as in the just released fourth season on DVD, now seems an appropriate time to judge the contribution of *Seinfeld* to the realm of media and philosophy. When it left the airwaves in 1998, it clearly left on top of the television ratings as it had dominated its time slot for years. In addition to its popularity, *Seinfeld* seemed almost unique in how it affected culture throughout its run. On Friday mornings after the Thursday night show, conversations across North America were sprinkled with such insider terms such as 'yada, yada, yada', 'no soup for you', and 'sponge-worthy'. These terms are generally meaningless to the larger population. Philosophy too has its own insider jargon; a dialect of a special group, generally inaccessible to outsiders. But *Seinfeld* and philosophy might share more than arcane nomenclature together. Philosophy is notorious in how it intersects popular culture in various ways. Philosophy dialogues with popular culture in obvious ways like aesthetics and ethics, but also in the more obscure areas of ontology and epistemology. If this close connection between philosophy and media is correct, then surely it is important to explore how *Seinfeld* might display the philosophy of contemporary culture.

Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book About Everything and Nothing edited by William Irwin is a book that exists to fill this (admittedly narrow) oversight. This text offers an

entertaining and, arguably, even necessary critical exploration of all things Seinfeld. *Seinfeld and Philosophy* bears no pretence of objectivity. It is clearly written for that market of philosophers and Seinfeld aficionados. It begins with a knowing wink to the hard core fan (the dedication is to Bob Sacamano) and ends with a knowing nod to philosophy (with a list of significant philosophers indexed in the final few pages). This work makes an effort to subtly explore the substance of a show that expressed its own irrelevance.

Seinfeld and Philosophy is divided into four acts and fourteen chapters. Act I (The Characters: aka the New York Four) explores the four main characters from the series. Elaine, Jerry, Kramer and George each are placed within a particular philosophical tradition. Each character is explored, though not necessarily explained. Act II (_Seinfeld_ and the Philosophers) places the show against a larger backdrop of philosophy in various times and ways. The teachings of Wittgenstein, Sartre and Nietzsche carry on a conversation with the characters from the sitcom. Act III (Untimely Meditations by the Water Cooler) is wide ranging discussion of some seemingly random philosophical observations about the show. Act IV (Is There Anything Wrong With That?) explores the ethical context of *Seinfeld*. Following these four acts is a series of indices that chronicle an episode list and list of significant philosophers.

Introducing this work is an overview by the editor, William Irwin. Irwin is concerned about justifying the need for a book dealing with a 'show about nothing'. This phrase is an important one in the *Seinfeld* universe. In the fourth season of the series, NBC approaches Jerry Seinfeld asks him to develop a sit-com for them. When Jerry and George pitch their idea to NBC, they describe their idea as a show about nothing. In our show 'nothing happens, just like real life' says George. With this background in mind, the relationship between nothing and something, being and nonbeing, becomes a theme to which many of the writers return. Irwin notes how this discussion didn't start with *Seinfeld* but has an impressive pedigree going back to Nietzsche (whose subtitle for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was 'A Book For None and All' and even earlier to some of the theoretical musings of Parmenides. Following Irwin's 'apologia', the various authors begin their exploration of *Seinfeld*.

The first section of the book (Act I) introduces the four main characters of the series. William Irwin pens the initial chapter, entitled 'Jerry and Socrates: The Examined Life?' Irwin intriguingly focuses upon the connection between the fictional Jerry Seinfeld and the real Jerry Seinfeld. He compares their close relationship to the relationship between Plato and Socrates. Specifically, Irwin notes the difficulty between distinguishing between the words

of Jerry and Jerry and Socrates and Plato. In addition he discusses the tendency of Jerry and Plato to utilize irony as well as to educate through questioning.

Daniel Barwick explores the life of George through the lens of Aristotle in the second chapter, 'George's Failed Quest For Happiness: An Aristotelian Analysis'. As Barwick explains, George is clearly the loser of the quad. Jerry, Kramer and Elaine have each attained some degree of success in life, but George has emphatically not. Barwick contends that George represents the human baseline; designated as the 'many' by Aristotle. George lives his life as the many do, prone to both rage and self-loathing while eliciting very little substantial happiness. That happiness which George does achieve is often transient and self-absorbed. Barwick attempts to explore the future of George, yet eventually concludes that it will eventually get George nowhere.

Sarah Worth explores the Elaine Benes character in her chapter entitled 'Elaine Benes: Feminist Icon or Just One of the Boys?' In this chapter, Worth looks at Benes and judges her to fill the role of a feminist icon (just barely). Worth describes Benes as one of the boys, but then compares her to her female colleagues from Thursday night television in the nineties. Worth concludes that Benes portrays a more positive role than the others because she is gainfully employed and more self-confident. Indeed, throughout the series she is the only character of the four who sets goals (suspect though they may be) and works to achieve them.

Irwin returns for the fourth chapter in the book with a character study on Cosmo Kramer. In 'Kramer and Kierkegaard: Stages along Life's Way', Irwin evaluates Kramer's character from the perspective of Kierkegaard's three stages of life. As Irwin quickly notes, this is fairly simple to do. Kramer never gets beyond Kierkegaard's initial stage of the aesthetic stage of life. Irwin's thesis is that the Kramer character 'provides us with an excellent example of someone dwelling in the aesthetic sphere of existence' (39). Irwin notes further that there are some similarities between Kierkegaard and Kramer. They each have experienced some estrangement from their parents. Additionally, both Kramer and Kierkegaard had a troubled childhood, with some trauma.

Kierkegaard and Kramer also share the fact that they each adopt various personas. Kierkegaard writes *Either/Or* under a pseudonym and Kramer also spends various episodes taking up various names and occupations. In his description of the aesthetic stage in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard describes the aesthete as one who constantly changes from one area of interest to another. The aesthete is amoral and chooses more based on diversions than on ethics. In a similar way, Kramer makes constant choices based more on emotion than reason. Irwin and the viewer face a dilemma. Like many sitcom inhabitants, Kramer is

a flat, not a round character. He doesn't grow as a character and cannot therefore make his way from the aesthetic to the ethical or religious spheres. Although he makes some attempts to do so, he ultimately fails. Perhaps that is why most viewers can relate to his character.

In the second section of the book (Act II: *Seinfeld* And the Philosophers), the writers read *Seinfeld* alongside streams of philosophic tradition. In the initial article of this section, 'Making Something Out of Nothing: *Seinfeld*, Sophistry and the Tao', Eric Bronson hones in on the concept of the show as nothing. Part of the lore surrounding the *Seinfeld* series is its purported focus on nothing. This focus on nothing as a plotline was a recurring theme on the show. Bronson examines how this theme of nothing has been significant in the history of philosophy as well. He incorporates the works of Parmenides and Plato's response to Parmenides' 'via negativa'. In particular, Bronson describes Plato's work *The Sophist* as a defense of nothing. Bronson then turns to eastern thought and includes a reading of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Chung*. He argues that the *Tao* portrays nothing as a powerful object that can overcome and transform. Ultimately this chapter successfully demonstrates that there has been a tremendous amount of philosophical discussion precisely over nothing.

Mark Conrad contributes the second article in this section entitled 'Plato or Nietzsche?: Time, Essence, and Eternal Recurrence in *Seinfeld*'. He reads *Seinfeld* alongside these two philosophers' contexts. First, Conrad examines how the series has individuals in identical situations on a recurring basis. For example, most episodes contain one or more of the following: Kramer bursts through Jerry's door, George ends up in a socially awkward setting, Jerry hisses 'Newman' through clenched teeth or Elaine shoves someone while exclaiming 'Get Out!' Conrad argues (correctly) that these do not precisely correspond to Nietzsche's conceptions of eternal recurrence, although Conrad does raise the tantalizing possibility that syndication might offer a fruitful path for this to occur. A more helpful take on the recurrence of these characters comes from Plato's discussion of essences. For Plato, an essence is that characteristic of something that distinguishes it from something else. Conrad thinks that the *Seinfeld* cast is best understood in the context of a recurring essence rather than a recurring time as Nietzsche understood it. 'The Bizarro Jerry' illustrates this recurring essence by depicting the characters as their individual traits.

In 'Seinfeld, Subjectivity, and Sartre' Jennifer McMahon analyses one of the crucial parts of the television text. McMahon has two objectives. Her first objective is an attempt to justify reading the *Seinfeld* series from a philosophical perspective. Her second objective is to argue that *Seinfeld* demonstrates Sartre's theory of Subjectivity. Specifically, McMahon argues that the formation of George's, Kramer's, Jerry's and Elaine's individual

selves occur only because of their relationship to one another. They are inherently identifiable only through their intertwined, mutual relationships. Individual identity emerges exclusively through the relationship of self to others. Lastly McMahon concludes with an intertextual reading of Sartre's *No Exit* and the final episode of the *Seinfeld* series 'The Finale'. Both works point to the relationship among several individuals and conclude with the primary characters incarcerated together.

The last chapter of the second section is Kelly Dean Jolley's 'Wittgenstein and Seinfeld on the Commonplace'. Jolley compares the focus of Wittgenstein on the commonplace with Seinfeld's episodic journey to minutia which often (pre)occupies the mind of each and every character on the show. If Seinfeld is the master of the mundane, then Wittgenstein might represent an expression of this perspective in the philosophical realm. A final similarity is in their equal dismissal of their own work. Seinfeld characterizes *Seinfeld* as a show about nothing and Wittgenstein characterized his own work as 'unimportant, at least in the sense that it builds nothing, creates nothing great or important' (117).

The Third act of this work is entitled 'Untimely Meditations by the Water Cooler'. In this section, the contributors write about how philosophy intersects with the series in diverse ways. The first article in this third section is written by Jason Holt and is entitled 'The Costanza Maneuver: Is it Rational for George to 'Do the Opposite?'' The 'Costanza Maneuver' is Holt's term for George Costanza's decision to start choosing the opposite of his natural instincts in the episode entitled 'The Opposite'. Since his entire life has been a miserable failure, George decides that doing the opposite of his natural inclination must lead to a better life. Holt explores the ramifications of that decision and also uses the episode as a basis for his discussion of what exactly the term rational means.

In 'Peterman and the Ideological Mind: Paradoxes of Subjectivity' Norah Martin explores the relationship of Lacan and *Seinfeld*. Specifically Martin examines the close relationship between cynicism and irony. Martin argues that in some ways, the Peterman character is the most realistic on *Seinfeld* because he is the one most hollow. That is, his catalog details numerous dashing exploits of his life that are completely fictitious. In reality, he is the most normal of the characters as his life is completely unexceptional. 'Mr. Peterman thus represents us most completely. The 'I' is experienced by us as emptiness and as desire. In other words, as dissatisfaction.' (146). J. Peterman, in Zizek's conception, thus demonstrates the nothingness that is so common to humanity.

Jorge Gracia takes on one of the most detailed discussions of a *Seinfeld* episode in a section entitled 'The Secret of Seinfeld's Humor: The Significance of the Insignificant'. This

(ambitiously titled) section argues that the secret to understanding *Seinfeld* is how he allows the viewer to see the significance of the insignificant and the insignificance of the significant. Gracia discusses in great detail 'The Outing' episode. This episode revolves around Jerry and George's frequent attempts to convince a reporter that they are NOT gay, all the while noting 'Not that there's anything wrong with that.' Gracia explores how an intense focus gender stereotypes and seemingly insignificant activities can be laden with (humorous) meaning. By focusing upon the minute portions of the episode, Gracia argues humor of the episode manifests.

'Is there Anything Wrong With That?' is the title of the fourth and final act of the text. This section examines the ethics of *Seinfeld*. The first article of this section is entitled '*Seinfeld* and the Moral Life' by Robert A. Epperson. Epperson correctly identifies proper conduct as one of the most significant themes in *Seinfeld*. Virtually every episode is devoted, at least in part, to what is the appropriate response to a given situation. Epperson builds on this concept and argues that this fascination with right conduct demonstrates that *Seinfeld* does not depict an immoral group of New Yorkers, but actually contains a significant foursome whose conversations regularly revolve around right action. The characters in *Seinfeld* depict morality in absolute terms and do not base their behavior on foundations like the Torah or the Bible. But they do attempt to live their lives in accordance with moral certainty and thus the series *Seinfeld* often discusses morality in a far more detailed way than other, more serious, television shows. Aeon Skoble contributes the second article in this section, 'Virtue Ethics on TV's *Seinfeld*'. In this article, Skoble discusses *Seinfeld* within the context of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Specifically he examines how the *Seinfeld* foursome is concerned with developing practical wisdom, discovering and emulating positive role models, and acting well. Because so many of their activities focus on these three actions, Skoble concludes that the characters in *Seinfeld* are very much interested in acquiring an ethical existence, following Aristotle along a similar path.

In the final article of section IV and the entire book, Theodore Schick surveys (appropriately enough) the final episode of *Seinfeld*. In his article 'The Final Episode: Is Doing Nothing Doing Something?' In the final episode, Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer stand idly by while a man is mugged. They are then arrested for violating the Good Samaritan law of Lathan, Massachusetts. During their trial, individuals from previous episodes repeatedly testify to their bad character. Schick traces the thought and justification behind the so-called 'Good Samaritan Laws'. He examines how a libertarian and communitarian perspective might affect our agreement over whether or not these

laws are a good idea. Schink finally concludes that the New York Foursome is in fact guilty of not helping the individual and morally should've assisted him.

Evaluation:

I suppose the first question I asked as I saw this title was 'why'? As a Seinfeld fan of many years I am intrigued by the critical thought applied to the series. This text is unabashedly written by and for Seinfeld fans. The authors display a depth of Seinfeld archana that is truly remarkable. Clearly this volume depicts the advantages of exploring popular culture from a philosophical perspective.

It is difficult to evaluate such a diverse and fascinating set of articles. Overall a collection can be judged on creativity and contribution to the field. This collection certainly excels in these areas. As someone who instructs in the field of philosophy I came up with numerous opportunities to incorporate areas of this work into my classes. Each essay highlighted at least one episode that will be helpful in getting across a significant philosophical point. This work is certainly a helpful assist from a pedagogical perspective.

McMahon's piece on Sartre is one of the strongest and addresses the skeptics who cast askance at the use of popular culture to illustrate philosophical inquiry. Her justification of the reading of popular culture as a legitimate field of inquiry offers great utility to scholars in other fields. If *Seinfeld* offers a fruitful arena for studies, then so may other works of popular media culture.

Someone unfamiliar with the Seinfeld universe might be lost in various articles. Some articles, like those by Gracia and Schick, offer an intensive look at particular episodes. But most of the pieces presuppose a great deal of familiarity with the main characters and with some of the more (in)famous episodes in the series. Obviously the fact that the collection is about this series serves the reader fair warning that some familiarity is helpful.

A second weakness of the text is the third sections. It is designed to simulate a conversation around a water cooler, but it seemed to be disconnected from the rest of the book. I think that the section on ethics could've been expanded with more articles and this section eliminated. This effect, incidentally would duplicate the habit of American and (usually) British situation comedies to follow the traditional three act structure.

A third weakness for the readers of this particular journal, there is little on the technical side of how the series is filmed. No mention is made of the use of three cameras in most episodes (or the exceptions, like the use of a single camera in 'The Trip (Parts I and II)'). None of the authors explored those elements of media criticism related to elements like mise en scene or composition of a shot. The authors could just as easily be analyzing a

written text rather than a television text. Obviously this was an intended omission on the part of the author, but readers looking for a formal critical evaluation of the technical, production side of *Seinfeld* would need to look elsewhere.

Related to this weakness is a lack of describing the particular genre of situation comedies. There is little in this text that explores the peculiarities of this art form. Only one article dealt in a substantive manner with why *Seinfeld* is particularly funny. No article discussed how the situation-comedy genre might affect how its message is delivered. I would be interested in reading what some of the author's felt about how the television medium affects the message of this particular series.

But omission is surely a lesser sin than commission and here the compilation truly excels. Most contributors do an impressive job of reading various episodes from disparate philosophical perspectives. This text does touch on an appropriately diverse number of thinkers and thoughts and would function as an excellent undergraduate text-book. It might even make Bob Sacamano proud.